As Revealed by Bhagwan Swaminarayan

Akshar-Purushottam Upāsanā

SATSANG PRAVIN

A Textbook of the Satsang Examinations Series: 13

Akshar-Purushottam Upāsanā

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Glossary

Introduction

He was a spiritual colossus who walked the length and breadth of India in just seven years. Hailed as a champion of peace and purity, he crusaded against the crippling evils in society.

Thousands admired him, obeyed him and above all held him in the highest reverence.

His name was Bhagwan Swaminarayan. Born on 3 April 1781 (Chaitra *sud* 9, VS 1837) in the village of Chhapaiya, near Ayodhya in North India, he was known as Ghanshyam during his childhood. His birth was a blessed light that had dawned on earth. At the age of eight, he was given the sacred thread. Extraordinarily brilliant and intelligent, he completed the study of Sanskrit grammar, the Vedas and other Sanskrit shastras within three years. When aged only ten he defeated learned scholars in a religious debate at Kāshi.

At the tender age of 11, Ghanshyam left home renouncing the world on 29 June 1792. He was known as Nilkanth Varni during his *vicharan* or travels. He went to the forests of the Himalayas and reached Pulhāshram, where he performed severe austerities for six months. In the course of his Himalayan pilgrimage, he met Gopāl Yogi from whom he studied and mastered ashtanga yoga. For seven years, he travelled barefoot across the length and breadth of India visiting various holy shrines.

On 21 August 1799, his travels came to an end when he arrived at Loj in Gujarat, where there was an ashram of Ramanand Swami. There Nilkanth met Muktanand Swami, the chief disciple of Ramanand Swami. After a few months, he met Ramanand Swami in Piplānā and accepted him as his spiritual guru.

On 28 October 1800, Ramanand Swami initiated Nilkanth and named him Sahajanand Swami. Although there were many scholars and senior disciples, Ramanand Swami chose Sahajanand Swami, just 21, as his spiritual successor on 16 November 1801. On that occasion, Sahajanand Swami prayed, “O, Gurudev! If your devotee is to suffer even a single scorpion bite, then let me suffer the pain of millions of scorpion bites in every pore instead; and if your devotee is destined to face the begging bowl, then let that begging bowl be my fate, but your devotee should not suffer from hunger or lack of clothing.”

Within a month, Ramanand Swami passed away leaving the following in the hands of young Sahajanand Swami. In time, his popularity increased and he came to be known as Swaminarayan.

Thousands witnessed his supernatural powers and miracles. By his divine splendour and spiritual powers, he graced many with samadhi – spiritual trance – enabling them to have a direct experience of the deities they worshipped. Many of them saw Swaminarayan in the highest abode during such experiences and came to recognize him as God.

He organized and ran alms-houses for mendicants, the needy and the poverty-stricken during famines. He also inspired countless men and women to tread the path

of morality and religion. Peter Brent writes in *Godmen of India*, "He created a band of five hundred *paramhansas*, the founding saints of his continuing order of monks. They gave themselves up to a life of total austerity, yet at the same time managed to go outward to the needy, building almshouses, digging wells and doing charitable work."

These *paramhansas* lived a life of celibacy and very high moral character. This reflects on the dynamic personality and the prodigious moral and spiritual force possessed by Bhagwan Swaminarayan. He and his disciple-sadhus started the work of morally and spiritually elevating society through their own pristine character, comprehensive teachings and humble service. All his sadhus strictly observed the five principle vows of *nishkām* – non-lust, *nirlobh* – non-covetousness, *nirmān* – non-pride, *nissneh* – non-attachment and *nisswād* – non-taste. All followers in general abstained from alcohol, meat-eating, adultery, stealing and faithfully discharged their duties according to their station in life. Truthfulness, non-violence and celibacy were the salient features of his devotees.

Bhagwan Swaminarayan uplifted the backward and scheduled castes. He changed the hearts of thieves and sinners, transforming them into true devotees free from vices. Pryns Hopkins, an American socialist, pacifist and author, notes, "Yet his message had a revolutionary effect on the personal lives and character of thousands of people in a very lawless period..... Members of martial and criminal tribes gave up meat and drink; they renounced the use of opium and tobacco, to both of which most were very much addicted."

By liberating the masses from illiteracy and ignorance, false beliefs and superstitions, addictions and bad habits, he kindled in them the flame of hope, love, faith and devotion. He lived with them in their low-roofed houses, mingled with them, became a part of them and uplifted them to the level of virtuous devotees leading a life of moral and spiritual purpose. Such a change aroused great respect and regard for him in the minds of the people at large. Many came to realize and worship him as Purushottam –the supreme God.

Bhagwan Swaminarayan was the very embodiment of love and compassion. He looked upon all with an equal eye – Brahmins and outcastes, rich and poor, princes and paupers, the pious and the downtrodden. Henry George Briggs, ____, observes in *Cities of Gurjarastra*, "Sahajanand was loved beyond belief by his disciples – comprising men of talent, of station, and of wealth; the poor, the ignorant, the rude – and who would have sacrificed life itself for their preceptor."

He brought about a great awakening in the path of morality and devotion. He elevated society by encouraging education even for women – considered a revolutionary practice in those days. He fought against the malpractices of female infanticide and *sati* – where the widow was forced to join her husband on the funeral pyre. He preached non-violence, forbidding the practice of sacrificing animals in *yagnas*. An advocate of moral and religious respect, he eradicated evil by non-violent means, such as love, goodness, service and sacrifice. Henry George Briggs notes, "Swaminarayan welcomed and accepted everyone for discipleship, with the same rights and privileges, be they Muslims, Parsees, Christians or of other faiths."

To keep his religious institution free from corruption and to maintain moral purity, Bhagwan Swaminarayan made special arrangements for women to worship and receive religious education through female preachers. Separate mandirs were built for them. He remedied the misery and loneliness of widows by diverting their minds to God as their real solace and saviour, through the promotion of single-minded devotion.

He taught people to live simple, pious and virtuous lives. He himself lived an ascetic life of detachment, renunciation, dedication and sacrifice. He preached the gospel of devotion to the masses, seeing nothing but God in all. To love, to **up**lift and to liberate was his motto.

His religious discourses were noted and compiled by four senior *paramhansas* to form the Vachanāmrut – the most sacred shastra of the Sampradaya, containing his teachings and philosophy. He also wrote the Shikshāpatri – a small text containing the essence of the codes of ethics in 212 verses.

He promoted devotion and constructed six grand traditional mandirs in **a** short span of eight years. After working incessantly for 30 years, Bhagwan Swaminarayan left this mortal world and returned to his abode on 1 June 1830. A contemporary writer notes, "And as the announcement of his death was winged, one wail, loud and piercing and bitter, rang throughout Gujarat upon the signal calamity which was believed to have befallen the country."

Although referred to as one of the last great stalwarts of traditional Hinduism, Bhagwan Swaminarayan showed many characteristics of what is considered Neo-Hinduism. By the time he passed away at the age of 49, he had earned a reputation as a great socio-religious reformer. In his own lifetime, he was worshipped as God by **a** large following of devotees.

The essence of Bhagwan Swaminarayan's teachings was to continue his work on this earth through a God-realized Sadhu. Through his spiritual presence, Bhagwan Swaminarayan continues – to this day – to provide energy and experience through a succession of God-realized spiritual masters.

The first guru in the spiritual succession was Gunatitanand Swami (1785-1867) who furthered the mission by his **spiritual** talks. He changed the lives of countless people and strengthened their faith in the supremacy of Bhagwan Swaminarayan. In his very lifetime, Gunatitanand Swami came to be recognized as the manifestation of Aksharbrahman – the nearest and dearest devotee of God.

He was succeeded by Bhagatji Maharaj (1829-1897) who made a valuable contribution to the Sampradaya by explaining the true glory of Bhagwan Swaminarayan and Aksharbrahman Gunatitanand Swami.

After him, Shastriji Maharaj (1865-1951) furthered the cause by spreading the philosophy of Akshar and Purushottam. In consonance with the teachings of Bhagwan Swaminarayan, Shastriji Maharaj propagated the worship of Bhagwan Swaminarayan as Purushottam and Gunatitanand Swami as Aksharbrahman. Despite overwhelming difficulties, he built five glorious mandirs and consecrated the dual *murtis* of God along with his choicest devotee. He founded the Bochasanwasi Shri Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha (BAPS) – a socio-spiritual organization – in June 1907.

The fourth spiritual master was Yogiji Maharaj (1892-1971), whose work carried the message of Bhagwan Swaminarayan across the oceans to East Africa and England. His crystal-pure innocence, towering saintliness and selfless love inspired all. He established youth and children's centres where weekly assemblies played the role of enlightenment and character building. He passed away after placing the oars of the Sanstha in the hands of Pramukh Swami Maharaj in 1971.

Born in the village of Chansad in 1921, Pramukh Swami Maharaj was initiated as a sadhu by Shastriji Maharaj in 1940. His initiation name was Sadhu Narayanswarupdas. In the first few years as a sadhu, he studied Sanskrit and served in the mandirs under the guidance of his guru. His deep devotion and dedication soon won the total faith and confidence of Shastriji Maharaj.

In 1950, when Sadhu Narayanswarupdasji was only 28 years old, Shastriji Maharaj appointed him as President (Pramukh) of BAPS Swaminarayan Sanstha in his own place. From then on, he came to be known as Pramukh Swami. Before Shastriji Maharaj passed away in 1951, he instructed Pramukh Swami to work under Yogiji Maharaj.

For the next 20 years, the young disciple served Yogiji Maharaj with the same zeal and obedience as he had his predecessor. Pramukh Swami inspired, not through orders or commands, but through personal example and commitment. The 1960s saw a period of great expansion for the Sanstha.

On 23 January 1971, Yogiji Maharaj left this world. Pramukh Swami, the perfect disciple, became Pramukh Swami Maharaj, to fulfil the role of the perfect spiritual master. Since then, under his able leadership and loving inspiration, BAPS Swaminarayan Sanstha has developed into a worldwide organization with over **1000** mandirs, over 3,700 Satsang centres, about 950 sadhus and over a million followers spread over five continents.

Under the inspiration of Pramukh Swami Maharaj, the Sanstha performs a wide variety of social, educational, environmental, medical, moral, cultural and spiritual activities which have helped millions of people worldwide.

Swamishri himself leads an austere life, untiringly travelling from tiny tribal huts to modern metropolitan cities all over the world, to promote a value-based life. At his tender word, thousands have left addictions and walked the path of God.

His striking humility, profound wisdom and simplicity have touched many. His love for mankind and respect for all religions is weaving a fabric of cultural unity, interfaith harmony and universal peace.

The sole reason behind his unique success is his deep, fluent communion with God.

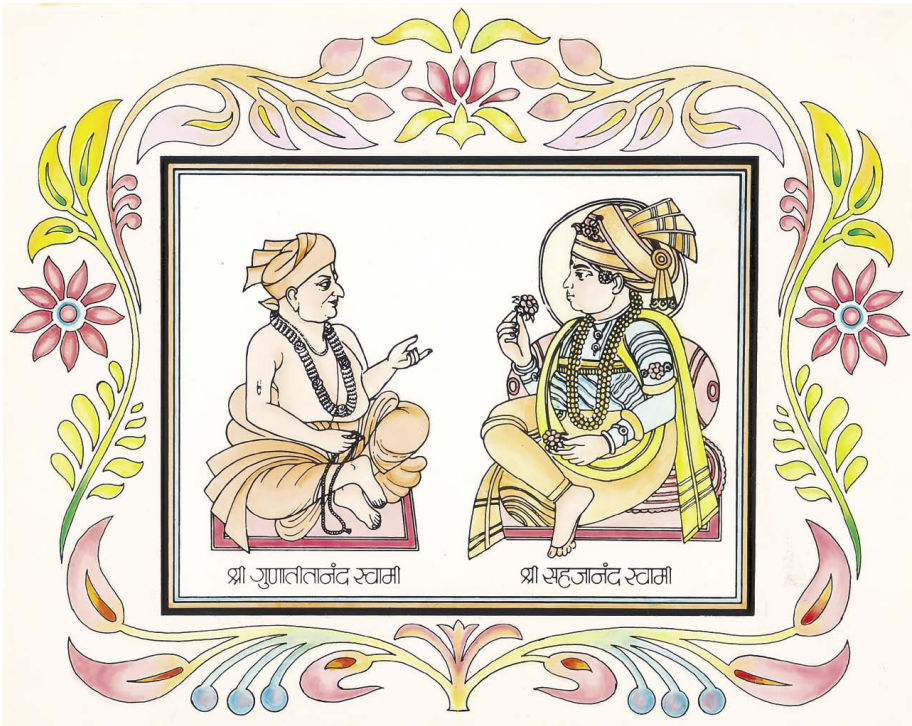
This publication in English is a translation of the Gujarati book *Akshar-Purushottam Upāsanā*.

This book has been designed to serve as part of the curriculum for the Satsang Examinations. More specifically, it is one of the textbooks for the fourth level examination, Satsang Pravin.

It is our earnest prayer that all *satsangis* study this book carefully, pass the examinations with flying colours, and above all, derive immense spiritual benefits and

please Bhagwan Swaminarayan and guru Pramukh Swami Maharaj.

- Swaminarayan Aksharpith



Ame sau Swāminā bālak, marishu Swāmine māte;
Ame sau Shrijitanā yuvak, ladishu Shrijine māte...
Nathi dartā nathi kartā, amārā jānni parvā;
Amāre dar nathi koino, ame janmyā chhie marvā...ame 1
Ame ā yagna ārambhyo, balidāno ame daishu;
Amārā Akshar Purushottam, Gunātit jnānne gāishu...ame 2
Ame sau Shriji tanā putro, Akshare vās amāro chhe;
Svadharmi bhasma choli to, amāre kshobh shāno chhe...ame 3
Juo sau motinā Swāmi, na rākhi kai te khāmi;
Pragat Purushottam pāmi, malyā Gunātit Swāmi...ame 4

Translation

Pledge: Ame Sau Swamina Balak...

We are the children of Swami; we will die for him. We are the youths of Shriji Maharaj; we will fight for him. We are fearless; we will not shirk sacrificing our lives, for we are born to die. We have launched this movement and will undergo any suffering. We will sing the praises of Akshar-Purushottam.

We are the sons of Shriji Maharaj; we have our abode in Akshar. Consecrated as we are to *swadharma* (religious faith), we have no apprehension whatsoever. Lord Purushottam and Akshar, Gunatitanand Swami, are with us. We have accomplished our

goal.

1. UPĀSANĀ

The Sanskrit word *upāsanā* is a compound of two words: *upa* – meaning 'near'; and *āsanam* – meaning 'to sit'. Thus, *upāsanā* is the manner in which an aspirant endeavours spiritually to forever reserve a seat near God. In simple terms, it is one's way of understanding God, the mode in which one offers devotion to him.

It is essential for all followers of the Sampradaya to have a clear concept of *upāsanā*. An attempt has therefore been made in this book to explain, in easy-to-understand language, *upāsanā* of Akshar-Purushottam as taught by Bhagwan Swaminarayan.

We can confidently say, on the basis of the words of Bhagwan Swaminarayan himself, by the assertions of the sadhus who were privileged to have personal contact with him, and finally by the evidence based on the experience of the God-realized Sadhus, that Shastriji Maharaj (Shastri Yagnapurushdasji) had a clear understanding of the true Akshar-Purushottam *upāsanā*, and was the pioneer in propagating it. Following in the footsteps of Shastriji Maharaj, Yogiji Maharaj, Pramukh Swami Maharaj and their disciples have spread the message of this pure *upāsanā* throughout the world.

1.1 Importance of Upāsanā

All aspirants are striving to attain *brahmabhāv* through *vrat* (vows), *tapa* (austerities), *yagna* (offerings), *dān* (alms) and satsang (association with sadhus and religious people). By such religious activities, followers on the spiritual path aspire to attain *moksha* and thus liberation from the cycles of birth and death. To achieve this, *upāsanā* is absolutely indispensable.

Bhagwan Swaminarayan, known to his followers as Shriji Maharaj or simply Maharaj, states in the Vachanāmrut, "Many people become realized yogis, many become omniscient, many become deities, and thus attain countless types of greatness, including the highest state of enlightenment. All this is achieved through the force of the *upāsanā* of God. Without *upāsanā*, though, nothing can be accomplished. … Therefore, forsaking one's dependence on the strength of other spiritual endeavours, one should rely exclusively on the strength of God's *upāsanā*" (Vachanāmrut, Gadhadā I 56).

Shriji Maharaj is emphatic about the impossibility of achieving *ātmajnān* or *brahmajnān* in the absence of *upāsanā*. He says, "Only through *upāsanā* can the *ātmā* and Brahman be seen; without it, they cannot be seen. In fact, wishing to see the *ātmā* and Brahman without *upāsanā* is like attempting to lick the sky with one's tongue; even if one tries for a hundred years, one will never be able to taste it as sour or salty. Similarly, the *ātmā* and Brahman simply cannot be seen without the *upāsanā* of the form of God – regardless of the efforts one may resort to. Furthermore, the shastras' mentioning of the possibility of *ātmā*-realization through *nirbij*[1] Sānkhya and Yoga is irrelevant – I have not seen anyone do so, nor is the claim in accordance with my experience. Therefore, the claim is false" (Vachanāmrut, Gadhadā III 36).

Shriji Maharaj also says, "Death, however, is like an ocean. In that case, both a

person with *ātmā*-realization and a person without it require the help of a ship in the form of faith (*upāsanā*) in God. Therefore, only the firm refuge of God is helpful at the time of death, whereas *ātmā*-realization alone is of no use whatsoever at the time of death. For this reason, one should firmly cultivate faith (*upāsanā*) in God" (Vachanāmrut, Gadhadā I 61).

Aksharbrahman Gunatitanand Swami says, "*Moksha* – ultimate liberation – can be attained only through *upāsanā*." (Swāmini Vāto 5.135).

Furthermore, Swami says, "Our greatness is due to *upāsanā*. Even if one falters in observing dharma or other spiritual endeavours, if *upāsanā* is firm, the *jiva* will not flounder" (Swāmini Vāto 5.70).

Swami also says, "Even if one encounters intense misery like the final destruction of the world, one who has firmly developed the *upāsanā* of God understands that the body will die one day and we (the *ātmā*) will go to God's abode. With this understanding, one remains happy" (Swāmini Vāto 1.56).

1.2 What Is Upāsanā?

The Vachanāmrut contains numerous references in which Shriji Maharaj has stressed the importance of clearly understanding *upāsanā* to develop firm faith in God. Faith implies understanding that:

1. God is the all-doer – *sarva kartā.*
2. He always has a divine form – *divya sākār*.
3. He is supreme and transcends all – *sarvopari*.
4. He is always present in human form – *pragat.*

In the absence of such faith, an aspirant cannot attain Akshardhām – God's divine abode.

In the following chapters we will discuss the details of these four facets of *upāsanā.*

1. That Sankhya and Yoga which promotes the understanding that God is formless.

2. KARTĀ:
God Is the All-Doer

2.1 How Is God Kartā?

Parabrahman Paramātmā is *sarva kartā* – the all-doer. Unless willed by him, nobody can move even a dry leaf. He gives all living beings the fruits of their karmas – actions. Though he does not play an immediate role in creating, sustaining or dissolving the universe, he is the ultimate cause of all causes.

Antah pravishtaha shāstā janānām sarvātma,
Dwelling within the ātmā of all the jivas, God controls them.

- Taittiriyāranyakam 3.11

In the way God governs all living beings, he also governs the deities and supervises their actions, controlling them according to his will. By his *ichchhāshakti*, *kriyāshakti* and *jnānshakti*, he inspires the appropriate *shakti* in the *jivas*. God has the power to absorb *māyā*. And even while supporting Akshar, he has the power to absorb Akshar. God possesses *kartum*, *akartum* and *anyathākartum shakti*. A dedicated seeker should therefore realize God as the all-doer and seek refuge in him.

Shriji Maharaj has said, "God, who is the cause of all, appears like a human being; yet by his yogic powers, he is able to create countless millions of *brahmānds* from his body and is able to absorb them back into himself. …So, one who is wise realizes, 'God appears like a human, but, in fact, he is the cause of all and the creator of all; he is all-powerful' " (Vachanāmrut, Loyā 2).

"In the same way, the factors of place, time (*kāla*), karma and *māyā* can only do as much as God allows them to do; they cannot do a single thing against the wish of God. Therefore, only God is the all-doer" (Vachanāmrut, Gadhadā II 21).

2.2 Shriji Maharaj: The All-Doer

Parabrahman Purushottam Nārāyan, the all-doer, is Shriji Maharaj. This point has been clearly brought out in a number of Vachanāmruts by Shriji Maharaj himself. It has also been reiterated in other texts of the Sampradaya in these and other similar words: "This very manifestation", "Visible before you in human form", "The God who accepts your devotion", "God who is *pragat* – present – before you."

The following excerpts affirm this point, "Thus God eternally possesses a form. In addition, he is the creator, sustainer and destroyer of countless *brahmānds*; he is forever present in his Akshardhām; he is the lord of all; and he is *pratyaksh* – manifest here before your eyes" (Vachanāmrut, Gadhadā III 35).

"I am the creator, sustainer and destroyer of all of the *brahmānds*. In those countless *brahmānds*, it is by my divine light that countless Shivs, countless Brahmās, countless Kailāses, countless Vaikunths, Goloks, Brahmapurs, as well as countless millions of other realms are radiant.

"What am I like? Well, if I were to shake the earth with the toe of my foot, the

worlds of countless *brahmānds* would begin to shake. It is also by my light that the sun, the moon, the stars, etc., are radiant" (Vachanāmrut, Ahmedābād 7).

In the Bhaktachintāmani, written by Nishkulanand Swami, Shriji Maharaj says:

"Vali kahu ek vārtā, sarve kidhu āpanu thāy chhe;
Sukh dukh vali jay parājay, yatkinchit je kahevāy chhe.
Je je āpanane nav game, te jiva kem shake kari;
Juo sarve jaktamā, kon shake chhe fel āchari.
...Te māte tame sāmbhalo, satsangi sahu narnār;
Je je thāy chhe jaktamā, teno bijo nathi karnār."

Let me give you an account of the divine saga. Whatever happens is solely due to me.

Pleasure or pain, victory or defeat, call it what you will.

No one can do whatever I disapprove.

Nor can anybody in the wide world indulge in wanton behaviour.

Listen all male and female *satsangis*,

Whatever happens under the sun is not done by anyone else.

- Bhaktachintāmani 76

"Māru dhāryu asatya satya thāy chhe,
samarath māru nām sahi;
Māri drushti e jakta upaje shame,
anek rupe māyā thai..."

I am the omnipotent. As I wish, the untruth turns into truth.

With my look, the earth is created and dissolved, and *māyā* pervades in many forms.

- Bhaktachintāmani 68

Shriji Maharaj succinctly explains his doership in the kirtan '*Bolyā Shri Hari re...*':

"Jiva ishwar tano re, māyā kāla purush pradhān;
Saune vash karu re, sauno prerak hu Bhagwān.
Aganit vishwani re, utpatti pālan pralay thāy;
Māri marji vinā re, koithi taranu nav todāy."

The inspirer of *jiva, ishwara*, *māyā*, *kāla*, Purush, Pradhān; I control them all. I am the inspirer of all, God.

I create, sustain and dissolve countless worlds; Without my will, no one can pluck even a blade of grass.

- Sadguru Premanand Swami

2.3 Necessity of Knowing God As the All-Doer

The paramount sadhana for the liberation of the *jiva* is to know God as the all-doer. Shriji Maharaj says, "For the purpose of liberation, however, realizing God to be the all-doer is the only means" (Vachanāmrut, Gadhadā II 21).

"Furthermore, the *jiva's* liberation is attained only by the following understanding: 'Everything happens by the will of the incarnate form of Shri Krishna Nārāyan, not by *kāla,* karma*, māyā,* etc.' In this manner, understanding only God to be the all-doer is the supreme cause of liberation. …There is no sinner worse than the person who does

not realize God to be the all-doer. In fact, he should be known to be a sinner worse than one who has killed a cow, killed a Brahmin, associated with the wife of one's own guru or maligned a true guru who is a knower of Brahman. Why? Because he believes *kāla,* karma, etc., to be the cause of everything, not God. In fact, one should not even stand in the shadow of such persons who are *nāstik* outcasts, nor should one listen to their talks, even unknowingly" (Vachanāmrut, Kāriyāni 10).

Furthermore, "God is the all-doer. To ignore this and to claim that only *kāla,* karma, *māyā* and *swabhāv* are the all-doers of this world is serious slander against God" (Vachanāmrut, Vartāl 2).

Therefore a true devotee "realizes that God is not like *kāla*, not like karma, not like *swabhāv*, not like *māyā*, and not like Purush. He realizes God to be distinct from everything, their controller and cause; yet, despite being their cause, he is beyond their influence" (Vachanāmrut, Gadhadā I 62).

A devotee can become fearless only by seeking complete refuge in Purna Purushottam Bhagwan Swaminarayan. If he is convinced that whatever happens in this world is God's doing, he will not fear any deity or goddess, mantra, *tantra* or *jantra,* and will remain mentally stable in times of misery and happiness.

Aksharbrahman Gunatitanand Swami observes, "If someone happens to come rushing in a violent rage, the devotee should still understand that whatever happens is as willed by my master [God]. Without his will, nobody can move even a leaf" (Swāmini Vāto 1.88).

By firm conviction of the omnipotence and all-doership of God, the devotee is able to abide by all his commands. He realizes God's infinite glory and progresses on the spiritual path, ultimately attaining the *ekāntik* state. In adversity, a devotee may fail to observe some minor religious tenets, but his conviction saves him from becoming disheartened. As a matter of fact, on the spiritual path, doubts such as, 'Will I be liberated or not?' act as obstructions. It is therefore of utmost importance to have unflinching conviction of God's doership, as it is a fundamental principle of *upāsanā*.

3. SĀKĀR:
God Has a Form

3.1 Liking for Sākār

Earlier, we learnt in the *upāsanā* explained by Shriji Maharaj that he is disinterested in the divine light as the final goal. The aspirant should not merely stop at this stage. Shriji Maharaj has clearly shown his liking for *sākār* – that God is with a form (Vachanāmrut, Loyā 14) as opposed to *nirākār* – the notion that God is formless.

Maharaj clearly states his liking for the divine form of God. In the Vachanāmrut, Maharaj comments, "I myself also accept that view (that God has a divine form)…" (Vachanāmrut, Gadhadā I 71).

Speaking about his innate nature, Shriji Maharaj says, "In fact, so firm is my conviction that God possesses a form that even though I have read and heard many Vedanta shastras, my conviction has not been dislodged" (Vachanāmrut, Gadhadā II 39).

Shriji Maharaj also explains the reason behind his firm faith in the divine form, "I have delivered this discourse having experienced it directly myself. Therefore, there is not a trace of doubt about it" (Vachanāmrut, Gadhadā I 64).

Since Shriji Maharaj has a strong inclination for the divine form of God, he truly likes a devotee who worships the divine form of God (Vachanāmrut, Gadhadā III 30).

Shriji Maharaj further clarifies this point in the Vachanāmrut, "He also understands that God and his devotees eternally possess a form; but never does he understand them to be formless, regardless of any Vedanta shastras he may hear. …A person with such firm conviction that God has a form, even if he is an ordinary person, is still dear to me" (Vachanāmrut, Gadhadā I 37).

In Shriji Maharaj's eyes, only an aspirant who has faith in the divine form of God is a genuine devotee, "*Upāsanā* can be defined as having a firm conviction that God eternally possesses a form. Even if a person becomes *brahmarup*, that conviction would never disappear. Moreover, even if he happens to listen to shastras propounding the view that God is formless, he would still understand God to always have a form. Regardless of what is mentioned in the shastras, he would only propound that God has a form, never allowing his own *upāsanā* to be refuted. One who has such a firm understanding is considered to possess *upāsanā*" (Vachanāmrut, Gadhadā I 40).

However, "If he does not understand God to possess a form, then his *upāsanā* cannot be considered resolute" (Vachanāmrut, Gadhadā III 35).

Therefore, "One should never refute the form of God" (Vachanāmrut, Gadhadā I 71).

These precise words of Shriji Maharaj make it absolutely clear that he himself has unshakable faith in the divine form of God, as well as love for those who accept such a belief.

Shriji Maharaj has deep faith in God's form. He also wishes his followers to share

the same faith, so that they may be freed from all sins and attain liberation. To avail of these double blessings, he instructs all followers to have faith in God's divine form. He assures them, "If a person realizes God to possess a form and is convinced of this, then even if he happens to commit a sin, there is nothing to worry about. Because by the grace of God, all of those sins will be burnt and his *jiva* will attain God. Therefore, one should keep a firm conviction of the form of God and staunchly worship him. This is my message to you. So, please imbibe these words firmly in your lives" (Vachanāmrut, Gadhadā II 39).

A follower at a premature stage may not have firm faith in the divine form of God. To protect him from being influenced by the precepts of formlessness, Shriji Maharaj advises with caution, "Shastras which do not promote God possessing a form… but instead discuss pure Vedanta and propound a single, formless entity, should never be studied or heard, even if they have been written by someone very intelligent" (Vachanāmrut, Loyā 6).

Shriji Maharaj has also advised against associating with *shushka* Vedāntins as they believe God to be *nirākār*.[2]

In all these spiritual dialogues, Shriji Maharaj has clearly stated his liking for the divine *sākār* form of God. At the same time, he has also expressed his total dislike for the concept that God is *nirākār*. He says, "To learn about the beliefs of those possessing *shushka-jnān*, I listened to their shastras. Merely hearing them, though, has caused much grief in my heart." Describing this, the *paramhansas* write, "In [this] distressed mood, the white *feto* tied around his head had loosened and become undone, yet he paid no attention to it. In this manner, he sat extremely distressed for a few minutes and tears began to flow from his eyes" (Vachanāmrut, Gadhadā II 19).

3.2 Disadvantages of Understanding God as Nirākār

There are many references in the Vachanāmrut supporting *sākār* and refuting *nirākār*. A few excerpts will suffice to clarify this. To treat God as *nirākār* amounts to negating the very form of God, who is to be worshipped and meditated upon. Shriji Maharaj therefore warns, "To realize God as being formless is a sin much graver than even the five grave sins. There is no atonement for that sin" (Vachanāmrut, Gadhadā II 39).

"Furthermore, of all mistakes made against God, to denounce the form of God is a very grave mistake. One should never make this mistake. One who does do so commits a sin more serious than the five grave sins" (Vachanāmrut, Gadhadā I 71).

"God is complete, with limbs, hands, feet, etc. …So, to say he is not the all-doer and he is formless… is equivalent to maligning God. Without such an understanding, even if one performs puja by offering sandalwood paste, flowers, etc., one is still a slanderer of God" (Vachanāmrut, Vartāl 2).

"If, however, one… realizes God to be formless or like the other avatars, then that is regarded as committing blasphemy against God" (Vachanāmrut, Gadhadā II 9).

For those well-versed in the shastras, eminent in society and progressing on the spiritual path, Shriji Maharaj warns, "A person may well be endowed with each and

every virtue, but if he believes God to be formless – not possessing a definite form – then that is a grave flaw. So much so, that because of this flaw, all of his virtues become flaws" (Vachanāmrut, Loyā 16).

"On the other hand, a person who meditates on God and offers *upāsanā* believing him to be formless is consigned to *brahma-sushupti*, from which he never returns. Nor does such a person ever acquire any spiritual powers from God" (Vachanāmrut, Gadhadā I 64).

Gunatitanand Swami also says, "Those who describe and know the form of God as formless, and misinterpret the shastras will, for countless births – for 10,000 years in Tretāyuga, for 1,000 years in Dwāparyuga, and for 100 years in Kaliyuga – not even be able to cry with relief when they are cut out from the womb. In this way, they will endlessly suffer miseries for an infinite period of time, but they will not get any happiness" (Swāmini Vāto 3.16).

3.3 Origin of The Understanding of God as Nirākār

As mentioned earlier, by treating God as formless, one commits a far more serious sin than the five grave sins. Not only that, but such conduct maligns God and negates all one's virtues. Naturally, the question arises as to how the understanding of a *nirākār* God developed?

Using the shastras, some argue that God is formless. To them, Shriji Maharaj replies, "The Shrimad Bhāgavat proclaims that Brahman possesses a form. However, if those who read it do not have bhakti for God, they will understand God to be formless, even from reading the Shrimad Bhāgavat" (Vachanāmrut, Gadhadā II 10).

Shukdevji recited the Shrimad Bhāgavat. Narad, Shaunak and other sages, the pioneering spirits of the path of devotion delivered discourses on the Bhāgavat. Shukdevji preferred discourses on God to meditation:

Parinishthito'pi nairgunye uttamashlokalilayā;
Gruhitachetā rājarshe ākhyānam yadadhitavān.

Addressing King Parikshit, Shukdevji says, "O King! Despite being perfectly poised in the *nirgun* state, I – having been attracted by the divine actions and incidents of God – studied the [Shrimad Bhāgavat] epic."

- Shrimad Bhāgavat 2.1.9

Reciting the account of God's divine life, Shukdevji does not interpret him as formless. While describing his human behaviour as divine and not *māyik*, there is negation of the *māyik* form. Reading this description, the ignorant and undevout interpret this to mean that God is formless and then stubbornly stick to these beliefs. They pick out words from the shastras that support their misunderstanding. Subsequently, by preaching their false beliefs, they mislead the aspirants.

Shriji Maharaj says, "From a group of people, someone saw the tail of a cow, someone else saw its mouth, someone saw its hoof, another saw its stomach, and yet another saw its udder. Whichever part of the cow was seen did, in fact, belong to the cow, yet no one saw the cow completely. But, because at least one part was seen, it can be said that the cow was actually seen. In the same manner, a person can be said to

have seen the *ātmā* to the extent to which he has seen the light of the *ātmā* through his *indriyas* or *antahkaran*. This, however, cannot be said to be perfect *ātmā*-realization" (Vachanāmrut, Loyā 15).

The understanding of the formlessness of God is propagated by those who have not attained the stage of self-realization or God-realization and by those who do not have faith in the form of God. Either they have not correctly grasped the scriptural meanings or they are deliberately distorting them. Therefore it is laid down in the shastras, "The words of the shastras cannot be understood in their true context by anyone except an *ekāntik bhakta*. Which words? Words such as, 'God is formless', 'universally pervasive', 'luminous' and '*nirgun*'. On hearing such descriptions, a fool concludes that the shastras describe God as being formless" (Vachanāmrut, Gadhadā I 66).

The listeners and readers are confused by descriptions of God as *nirgun* and infer that God has no form. However, their inference is the result of their misunderstanding (Vachanāmrut, Gadhadā I 66).

To attempt to understand the knowledge of God's form by the study of only one shastra often leads to imperfect understanding. Precisely for this reason, Shriji Maharaj clarifies, "In the Vedas, God himself has described his nature in many ways, but no one could comprehend it. …This is how the Sānkhya shastra and the Yoga shastra described God's nature; still, no one attained realization of the nature of God as he is. By inference it was accepted. …However, is that God black or yellow? Is he tall or short? Does he possess a form, or is he formless? That was not realized. …Thereafter, Vāsudev Bhagwan himself composed the Panchrātra Tantra, in which he explained, 'In his own Akshardhām, Shri Krishna Purushottam Bhagwan eternally possesses a divine form. …In this way, he propounded that God possesses a form. …Only one who realizes God through these four shastras [Sānkhya, Yoga, Vedanta and Pancharātra] can be said to possess total *jnān*" (Vachanāmrut, Vartāl 2).

"The drawback in trying to understand God's form from the Vedanta shastras alone is that God – who is described as the cause of all, pervading all and *nirgun* – is believed to be formless. The eternal form of God would not be realized as being devoid of *māyik* arms, legs, etc., and as possessing divine limbs" (Vachanāmrut, Gadhadā I 52).

Therefore, only a Satpurush can explain the apparent contradictions of the shastras. The knowledge of God's divine form can therefore only be attained through such a Sadhu. Shriji Maharaj explicitly says, "These facts [about the divine form of God] can be understood only from a person who firmly believes that God is forever divine and possesses a form; they can never be understood from others" (Vachanāmrut, Gadhadā I 64).

3.4 How Is God Sākār?

Shriji Maharaj has logically explained how God must be *sākār* and not *nirākār*. He explains that God is the creator of the moveable and immoveable world. If, however, he is formless, how could he possibly create an earth with a form? Shriji Maharaj says, "God is not formless. Why? Because it is through God that everything mobile and immobile is created. Now, if God were formless, then how could he create something

that possesses a form? For example, *ākāsh* is formless. Therefore, pots and other forms that can be created from *pruthvi* cannot be created from that *ākāsh*. In the same manner, since Brahmā and the rest of creation possess a form, God – their creator – also definitely possesses a form" (Vachanāmrut, Gadhadā II 10).

Reiterating this point, Shriji Maharaj says, "God eternally possesses a form" (Vachanāmrut, Gadhadā III 35). "He eternally has a form. If he did not have a form, he could not be called the all-doer" (Vachanāmrut, Panchālā 1). "God, thus possessing a form, is also the all-doer, since that which is formless can accomplish nothing" (Vachanāmrut, Gadhadā II 39).

Explaining the same point in a different way, Maharaj says, "Purushottam Bhagwan eternally possesses a form, and that form is extremely luminous. His perfect, all-pervasive *antaryāmi* form – Brahman, characterised by eternal existence, consciousness and bliss – is actually the divine light of Purushottam Bhagwan, but he himself possesses a definite form. The Shrutis also mention, 'That God looked towards *māyā*.' Now if God sees, does that mean that he has only a pair of eyes and nothing else? In reality, he does have hands and feet. This proves that he possesses a form. Take the example of water. Its corresponding deity, Varun, possesses a form in his own realm, while water itself is described as formless. Also, the flames of a fire are described as formless, while their corresponding deity, Agni, possesses a form in his realm. Sunlight is also described as being formless, while Suryadev, who resides in his realm, possesses a form. Similarly, Brahman – characterised by eternal existence, consciousness and bliss – is formless, while Purushottam Bhagwan possesses a form. Furthermore, that all-pervasive, perfect Brahman, with the attributes of eternal existence, consciousness and bliss, is the divine light of Purushottam Bhagwan. Someone may claim that the Shrutis propound, 'God is all-pervasive and perfect, without hands, feet, etc.' But those Vedic verses that refute the hands, feet, etc., of God are actually refuting *māyik* hands, feet, etc. In reality, God's form is divine, not *māyik*. Moreover, despite the fact that Purushottam Bhagwan's *brahmarup* light, which pervades all *jivas* and *ishwars* as their *antaryāmi*, is formless, it should be considered to possess a form. This is because it governs the granting of the deserved fruits of karmas to all *jivas* and *ishwars* according to their respective karmas. This power of governing makes it function as if it possesses a form. Thus, that divine light should be considered to possess a form as well. In the same manner, Purushottam Bhagwan always possesses a form; he is not formless. Those who do believe him to be formless just do not understand" (Vachanāmrut, Gadhadā I 45).

Emphasizing God's divine form, Shriji Maharaj elaborates, "On the other hand, an *ekāntik bhakta* realizes, 'When the shastras describe God as being formless and *nirgun*, they are referring to the fact that he does not possess a *māyik* form or *māyik* attributes. In reality, his form is forever divine, and he possesses countless redemptive virtues. There is also a reference to God being an immense mass of divine light. However, if there is no form, then there can be no light either; therefore, that light must definitely be from that form. …In the same way, having the intensity of a million suns, the divine light, which is like *brahmasattā*, is the light of the form of Purushottam Bhagwan. …

Therefore, regardless of which shastras are being read, if they describe God as being '*nirgun*', one should realize that they are merely extolling the glory of God's form; but, in fact, God always possesses a definite form" (Vachanāmrut, Gadhadā I 66).

3.5 God with a Form As Well As All-Pervasive

God is *vyāpak* – all-pervasive or immanent, but also *murtimān* – always with a form. In the Vedanta and other shastras, God is described as all-pervasive. Questions may arise such as, "How can God be pervasive, yet still have a form?" or "How can God have a form, yet still at the same time be pervasive?" Muktanand Swami asks a similar question in the Vachanāmrut, to which Shriji Maharaj replies, "Brahman resides in only one place, but not everywhere. …even though the shastras describe God as pervasive, he actually possesses a definite form. In those shastras, he is described as pervasive in the sense that using his own powers, he gives his darshan to all while still residing in one place. But he is not pervasive in the sense of being formless like *ākāsh*. So, in reality, God eternally possesses a form. It is that God with a definite form, who, while always residing in Akshardhām, appears in countless millions of *brahmānds*" (Vachanāmrut, Vartāl 13).

Nityanand Swami questions whether God dwells within the *jiva* without a form or with a form. And if he dwells with a form how can he be described as all-pervasive? Shriji Maharaj replies, "God dwells as the refuge of the *indriyas*, their presiding deities, the *antahkaran* and the *jiva*. Shri Krishna Bhagwan, for example, made Uddhavji explain to the gopis, 'I am near to you by being the refuge of your *indriyas, antahkaran*, their presiding deities and *jiva*. Just as the very same five *mahābhutas* which reside in the *brahmānds* are also within everyone's body, similarly, I reside in Mathurā like the *mahābhutas* reside predominantly in the *brahmānds*; but just like those *mahābhutas* reside subtly in the bodies of the *jivas*, I also reside within all of you. The fact that I cannot be seen is to keep the *vrutti* of your mind confined within me; that is why I cannot be seen. Nevertheless, I reside within you possessing a definite form" (Vachanāmrut, Loyā 15).

In this way, God resides in all the *jivas* and at the same time is all-pervasive. Shriji Maharaj explains how this actually happens, "That which possesses a form can also be pervasive. For example, Agnidev possesses a definite form when residing in his realm, but through his powers, he is latent within wood. Similarly, God possesses a definite form in his Akshardhām, but through his *antaryāmi* powers, he pervades the *jivas* and functions as if he possesses a form. Therefore, even that *antaryāmi* form should be considered to possess a form" (Vachanāmrut, Kāriyāni 4).

From these references of the Vachanāmrut, it is quite clear that God, with his divine form, dwells in the divine abode Akshardhām. Simultaneously he is all-pervasive by his *antaryāmi shakti*. The *antaryāmi shakti* also has a form as explained by Shriji Maharaj, "Moreover, despite the fact that Purushottam Bhagwan's *brahmarup* light, which pervades all *jivas* and *ishwars* as their *antaryāmi*, is formless, it should be considered to possess a form. This is because it governs the granting of the deserved fruits of karmas to all *jivas* and *ishwars* according to their respective karmas. This power of governing

makes it function as if it possesses a form. Thus, that divine light should be considered to possess a form as well" (Vachanāmrut, Gadhadā I 45).

Thus, Purushottam Nārāyan is *murtimān* – has a form – and yet is also *vyāpak* – all-pervasive.

3.6 God As Sākār in Akshardhām and on earth

Some people believe that when God appears on earth as a human incarnation, he is *sākār* and *sagun;* but in his divine abode, he is *nirākār* and *nirgun*. Shriji Maharaj clearly disapproves of this theory.

Shriji Maharaj mentions that God is also *sākār* in Akshardhām, "Conversely, the form of God in Akshardhām and the form of the *muktas* – the attendants of God – are all *satya*, divine and extremely luminous. Also, the form of that God and those *muktas* is two-armed like that of a human being, and it is characterised by eternal existence, consciousness and bliss" (Vachanāmrut, Gadhadā III 38).

"God, who possesses a definite form, is always present in his abode, Brahmapur" (Vachanāmrut, Gadhadā III 7).

In Premanand Swami's kirtan, *'Bolyā Shri Hari re...'* Shriji Maharaj affirms:

"Māru dhām chhe re, Akshar amrut jenu nām;
Temā hu rahu re, dwibhuj divya sadā sākār."

My abode is known as eternal Akshardhām.
I always dwell in it in a divine *dwibhuj* (two-armed) form.

- Sadguru Premanand Swami

Describing the divine form of God in Akshardhām, Maharaj says, "Amidst that divine light [of Akshardhām], I see the extremely luminous form of God. The form is dark, but due to the intensity of the light, it appears to be rather fair, not dark. The form has two arms and two legs, not four, eight or a thousand arms; and its appearance is very captivating. The form is very serene; it has a human form; and it appears young like a teenager" (Vachanāmrut, Gadhadā II 13).

Shriji Maharaj has expressly stated in many Vachanāmruts that God is with form – *sākār* – in Akshardhām. In his human incarnation on earth, he is also *sākār*. Therefore, he is forever *sākār*.

Stressing this, Maharaj says, "The manner in which the incarnate form of God resides on this earth, and the manner in which the devotees of God remain in the vicinity of God is exactly how they remain when *ātyantik-pralay* occurs. …God and his devotees eternally possess a form" (Vachanāmrut, Gadhadā I 37).

As God is with form on earth, similarly at the time of *ātyantik pralay,* he is in a divine form in Akshardhām. And as he has a form in Akshardhām, similarly he is with form during his human incarnation. Shriji Maharaj explains, "Even at the time of *ātyantik-pralay*, God and his devotees remain in Akshardhām, where the devotees enjoy divine bliss [in the form of darshan], having attained a divine and definite form. Moreover, the form of that God and the forms of the devotees of God possess divine light that is equivalent to the light of countless suns and moons. …Also, it is to liberate the *jivas* and to allow those *jivas* to offer the nine types of *bhakti* to him that that God –

who has a luminous and divine form – becomes like a human out of compassion, always doing so with all of his strength, divine powers and attendants. Even then, those who realize this esoteric truth understand the human form of God on this earth as being exactly the same as the form of God residing in Akshardhām – they do not feel that there is even a slight difference between that form and this form" (Vachanāmrut, Panchālā 7).

In this way God eternally possesses a form.

3.7 Divyabhāv – Divine Attributes

Some people are of the opinion that in his abode, God is *divya* (divine) as well as *sākār* (with a form*),* but in his human incarnation he has, like all mortals, a body, *indriyas* and *antahkaran* composed of *panchbhutas*. Therefore, his form on earth is not divine. Shriji Maharaj, however, refutes this view, "That God, also known as Parabrahman Purushottam, himself manifests on earth out of compassion, for the liberation of the *jivas*. When he manifests, all entities that he accepts become *brahmarup*. The three bodies, i.e., *sthul*, *sukshma* and *kāran*; the three states, i.e., waking, dream and deep sleep; the ten *indriyas*; the five *prāns*; etc., were all apparent in avatars such as Rama, Krishna, etc. Although all of them appear to be like those of ordinary humans, in reality, they are all *brahman*, not *māyik*" (Vachanāmrut, Gadhadā I 71).

Confirming this, Shriji Maharaj says, "God's form is such that he is *anvay* within *māyā* and yet, at the same time, he is *vyatirek*. God is not afraid, 'What if I enter *māyā* and thereby become impure?' Instead, when God associates with *māyā*, even *māyā* becomes like Akshardhām; and if he associates with the 24 elements, then they also become *brahmarup*" (Vachanāmrut, Vartāl 7).

Despite this, "The phases of childhood, youth and old age apparent in God, as well as his birth and death are all perceived due to his yogic powers of creating an illusion. In reality, God remains absolutely unchanged [always divine]. …In this way, the manifest form of Purushottam Nārāyan is the cause of all; he is forever divine and has a form. One should not perceive any type of imperfections in that form – it is like a *murti* made of *sākar*. …Furthermore, whichever human traits seem apparent in that God should be understood to be like the *'māyā'* of a magician" (Vachanāmrut, Panchālā 7).

Gunatitanand Swami also says, "Human attributes cannot be applied to God. With mortals, the body and the *jiva* are separate and distinct. However, it is not so with God" (Swāmini Vāto 4.40).

He also explains the reason for this, "The human traits that are seen in God are like the magic of a magician"(Swāmini Vāto 5.66).

All *tattvas* adopted by God become divine. There is nothing in God worthy to be discarded. Shriji Maharaj therefore advises one to refrain from quibbling over the *tattvas* in the divine form of God with these words, "One who understands God's form as being composed of the elements is a sinner, and one who understands God's form as not being composed of the elements is also a sinner. Those who are devotees of God do

not at all like to senselessly quibble over whether or not God's form is composed of the elements. A devotee realizes, 'God is God'. There is no scope for dividing or discarding any part of him" (Vachanāmrut, Gadhadā II 17).

To drive this point home, Shriji Maharaj elaborates, "The divine form of Purushottam Bhagwan Vāsudev is constantly present in that divine light [in Akshardhām]. Through that divine form, he himself becomes visible to everyone and manifests on earth in human form for the purpose of granting liberation to the *jivas*. But the *jivas* on earth who are ignorant fools claim that God has *māyik gunas* within him. In reality, though, he does not have any *māyik* gunas within him. He is forever *gunātit* and has a divine form. Moreover, it is that very same God, who has a form and is divine, that the Vedanta shastras propound as being uncuttable, unpierceable, *nirgun*, and pervading everywhere. It is to dispel the *māyik* view from the mind of the *jiva* that He has been propounded as being *nirgun*. That God remains as he is during the time of creation, sustenance and dissolution of the cosmos; i.e., he does not undergo any changes like worldly objects do. He always maintains a divine form" (Vachanāmrut, Kāriyāni 7).

"That God's form is supremely divine – there is not even the slightest trace of human traits – *manushyabhāv* – in God. Therefore, one should not perceive human traits in God, and one should instead initially view him as a deity; then one should view him as Brahmā, etc.; then one should view him as Pradhān-Purush; then as Prakruti-Purush; then as Akshar; and finally as Purushottam – who transcends Akshar" (Vachanāmrut, Loyā 18).

Clarifying still further, Shriji Maharaj says, "Therefore, there is a great similarity between the form residing in the abode of God and this incarnate form of Shri Krishna [Shriji Maharaj]. …Thus, the same form that is in Akshardhām – which is *gunātit* – is manifest. There is no difference between the two. Just as the form in the abode is *gunātit*, the human form is also *gunātit*" (Vachanāmrut, Gadhadā III 31).

God is thus eternally *divya* – with a divine form – and is *gunātit* – beyond the *gunas*. In spite of his sublime divinity, in his human incarnation, God behaves as one with all human traits so that devotees may experience happiness by serving him. They can fulfil their long-cherished desires and achieve liberation. At the same time, the wicked are beguiled by his actions. In any case, God is free from all blemishes. Shriji Maharaj has explained this point in the Satsangijivan:

"Asurānām vimohāya doshā Vishnornahi kvachit."

- Satsangijivan 3.29.107-8

3.8 Necessity of Understanding Divyabhāv

As mentioned earlier, on earth as well as in his abode, God always has a divine form. He accepts *manushyabhāv* – human attributes – in order to be on the same level as his devotees. Therefore, a true devotee should always be conscious of the sublime divinity of God. The knowledge of his *divyabhāv* – divinity – leads to freedom from the bondage of *māyā,* and grants ultimate liberation.

Shriji Maharaj has dealt with this point in many Vachanāmruts, as can be seen from

the following excerpts:

"Nevertheless, when Purushottam Bhagwan, who transcends both the perishable and the imperishable, assumes a human form and travels in the *brahmānd* for the liberation of the *jivas*, his actions are just like those of all humans. Just as humans possess *māyik swabhāvs* such as lust, anger, avarice, infatuation, *matsar*, jealousy, defeat, victory, fear, grief, arrogance, desires, cravings, etc., God also exhibits the same *swabhāvs* himself, but they are all for the liberation of the *jivas*. So, a true devotee extols the divine actions of God and attains the highest state of enlightenment. …Thus, all actions God performs after assuming a human form are worthy of being extolled. One should not doubt, 'Despite being God, why does he do this?' In fact, to realize all of God's actions and incidents as redemptive is the very dharma of a devotee, and only one who understands this can be called a perfect devotee of God" (Vachanāmrut, Gadhadā I 72).

Shriji Maharaj explains the same point in Vachanāmrut, Gadhadā II 10, "Shri Krishna says in the Bhagavad Gitā:

Janma karma cha me divyam-evam yo vetti tattvataha,
Tyaktvā deham punarjanma naiti māmeti so'rjuna.

O Arjun! My birth and my actions are divine. He who realizes them as divine will not take another birth when he leaves his body; rather, he will attain me.

"Whenever God performs divine actions, they appear divine to both a devotee and to one who is not a devotee. However, when God performs human-like actions, a true devotee still perceives divinity in them, but by no means does he perceive flaws in such actions of God. Having such understanding is known as having bhakti towards God. In fact, only such devotees earn the fruits mentioned in the above verse. …Therefore, bhakti in which one perceives all of the actions and incidents of God as being divine, as the gopis did, and never perceives a flaw by understanding them to be human-like, is very rare. …In fact, such bhakti is itself the highest state of enlightenment. It is this type of bhakti that is greater than *jnān* and *vairāgya*. If a person has such bhakti in his heart, what would be lacking in his love for God? Nothing would be lacking."

Furthermore Maharaj says, "Regardless of the type of action God performs, he does not perceive any fault in God. In addition, one who has faith in God coupled with the knowledge of His greatness becomes a fearless devotee" (Vachanāmrut, Vartāl 12).

Shriji Maharaj shows the means of subduing base instincts, which cannot be eradicated by sadhanas such as *tapa* (austerities), *tyāg* (renunciation), *vairāgya* (detachment), *vrat* (vows), *dhyān* (meditation) or ashtanga yoga, "If a person realizes God to be absolutely flawless, then regardless of his own *swabhāvs*, he himself becomes absolutely flawless as well" (Vachanāmrut, Gadhadā I 24).

"One who has realized God completely by believing that there are no *māyik* qualities in his form and that that God transcends *māyā* and the products of *māyā*, the three *gunas* – has transcended God's *māyā*. Despite the fact that he has within him the products of the *gunas* of *māyā*, i.e., the *bhutas*, the *indriyas*, the *antahkaran* and their presiding deities, each of which carries out its respective activities – he is still said to have transcended *māyā*" (Vachanāmrut, Vartāl 5).

"One who understands God as flawless by believing, 'God is capable; so whatever he does is appropriate,' is said to have overcome *māyā*" (Vachanāmrut, Loyā 4).

"Those who realize this esoteric truth understand the human form of God on this earth as being exactly the same as the form of God residing in Akshardhām – they do not feel that there is even a slight difference between that form and this form. One who has known God in this way can be said to have known God perfectly. For him, *māyā* can be said to have been eradicated. One who realizes this is called a devotee with *jnān* and an *ekāntik bhakta*. Moreover, if, by chance, a person possessing such firm *upāsanā* of the manifest form of God – never harbouring any doubts of *māyā* being present in the form of God – were to behave unbecomingly due to the influence of bad company or due to the influence of his own *prārabdha* karmas, even then he would attain liberation" (Vachanāmrut, Panchālā 7).

"When the divine and human characteristics of God and his Sadhu are considered as equally divine, then true bliss in worshipping God is attained" (Swāmini Vāto 5.100).

"By understanding God as fault-free, one also becomes fault-free" (Swāmini Vāto 5.124).

A *gunātit* Sadhu – in the same way as God – is also divine and *nirdosh*. Emphasizing this, Gunatitanand Swami says, "Understand the form of God to be free from all blemishes; and also understand the great God-realized Sadhu to be the same. There is no spiritual endeavour equivalent to this" (Swāmini Vāto 2.170).

Shriji Maharaj also says, "In fact, if one realizes the truly great *Purush* to be absolutely lust-free, then, even if one is as lustful as a dog, one will also become lust-free. …Therefore, if one understands the great *Purush* to be absolutely free of lust, avarice, taste, egotism and attachment, one will also become free of all of those evil natures and become a staunch devotee" (Vachanāmrut, Gadhadā I 58).

"Whoever believes the great *Purush* to be absolutely free of flaws becomes totally flawless himself" (Vachanāmrut, Gadhadā I 73).

It is therefore essential to accept God and the Sadhu as divine.

3.9 Disadvantages of Perceiving Manushyabhāv in God and His Sadhu

God and the *brahmaswarup gunātit* Sadhu, in human form, are eternally divine, *nirdosh* and transcend the three *gunas*. They are free from the slightest trace of *māyā* or *manushyabhāv* – human attributes, "God is devoid of each of the flaws that senseless people attribute to him. However, the intellect of the person attributing such flaws will never be freed of those flaws that he attributes to God. Specifically, a person who believes God to be full of lust will himself become intensely full of lust; a person who believes God to be full of anger will himself become intensely full of anger; a person who believes God to be full of avarice will himself become intensely full of avarice; and a person who believes God to be full of jealousy will himself become intensely full of jealousy; etc. In fact, whatever types of flaws a person attributes to God will ultimately cause misery to the person himself – just as a fistful of sand thrown at the sun falls back into the thrower's eyes" (Vachanāmrut, Gadhadā I 24).

Commenting further on this point, Shriji Maharaj quotes from the Bhagavad Gitā:

"Avajānanti mām mudhā mānushim tanumāshritam;
Param bhāvamajānanto mama bhutamaheshwaram.[3]

"Therefore, those who are fools fail to realize such transcendence of God and instead perceive human traits in God, seeing him as a human like themselves.

"What is meant by perceiving human traits? Well, it is when all of the feelings of the *antahkaran*, i.e., lust, anger, avarice, infatuation, arrogance, *matsar*, desires, cravings, etc.; and all of the characteristics of the physical body, i.e., bones, skin, faeces, urine, etc., as well as birth, childhood, youth, old age, death, etc.; and all other human characteristics are perceived in God. A person who perceives such characteristics may appear to have a conviction of God, but his conviction is flawed. As a result, he will surely fall from the Satsang fellowship.

"…Moreover, if a person does not believe God to be completely divine, then he repeatedly becomes upset and constantly perceives virtues and flaws; i.e., he thinks, 'God is favouring that person, but not me,' or 'he often calls that person, but not me,' or 'he has more affection for that person, and less for me.' In this way, he continues perceiving virtues and flaws. As a result, his heart becomes more and more despondent day by day, and ultimately he falls from Satsang" (Vachanāmrut, Loyā 18).

"However, if at some time that same devotee harbours doubts in the divine actions and incidents of God, either by the influence of unfavourable places, times, company, shastras, etc., or due to his identification with the body, then his *jiva*, which was like the full moon of Punam, becomes like the unlit moon of Amās. Therefore, some minor flaw in oneself will not really harm the *jiva* very much; but if one somehow doubts the divine actions and incidents of God, or if one somehow develops dislike for God, then that *jiva* instantly falls from the path of liberation. Just as when the roots of a tree are cut, the tree automatically becomes dry, similarly, a *jiva* who in any way perceives faults in God can never stay without falling from the Satsang fellowship" (Vachanāmrut, Vartāl 12).

"A person who perceives faults either in God's divine incidents or in his understanding should be known to be a non-believer and a sinner. In fact, he should be considered to be the king of all fools" (Vachanāmrut, Gadhadā II 53).

However eminent a devotee may be, but if he has any misgivings about God, he cannot transcend *māyā*. In this regard, Shriji Maharaj points out, "If even Brahmā and others doubt God's yogic powers, then they cannot be said to have overcome the power of God's *māyā*" (Vachanāmrut, Loyā 4).

Gunatitanand Swami also says, "If one continues to perceive human traits in God, then final *moksha* is not attained" (Swāmini Vāto 5.116).

One who looks at the weaknesses and faults of even the devotees of God is also sure to fall from the path of God and *ekāntik dharma*. Explaining this, Shriji Maharaj says, "God's and his *Bhakta's* understanding transcends this world. How, then, can a person who believes his self to be the body possibly comprehend it? So, it is simply out of one's foolishness that one perceives flaws in God and his *Bhakta* and thus falls from the path of God" (Vachanāmrut, Gadhadā II 53).

"For such *ekāntik bhaktas*, leaving the body is not considered to be death; rather, for

them, falling from that *ekāntik dharma* is true death. This occurs when an aversion arises in one's heart towards God or his Sant. It is then that that devotee should be known to have fallen from the dharma of *ekāntik bhaktas*. …Therefore, to perceive flaws in God and his *Bhakta* is a graver sin than committing the five grave sins" (Vachanāmrut, Gadhadā II 46).

One who looks at the shortcomings of a God-realized Sadhu, himself becomes a victim of those shortcomings. Shriji Maharaj therefore says, "If one perceives the fault of lust in the great *Purush*, then no matter how lust-free one may be, one becomes full of intense lust. In the same manner, if one views the great *Purush* to be full of anger or avarice, then one becomes full of anger and avarice" (Vachanāmrut, Gadhadā I 58).

Furthermore he says, "Whichever faults he perceives in the great *Purush* all return to dwell in his own heart" (Vachanāmrut, Sārangpur 18).

Therefore, Gunatitanand Swami says, "What is the worst of all? That one attributes human traits to this Sadhu – there is nothing worse than this" (Swāmini Vāto 3.36).

By attributing human weaknesses to God in human form and his *Ekāntik* Sadhu, one goes astray and spoils all chances of liberation. Thus, Shriji Maharaj warns his followers, "Therefore, one should certainly not perceive human traits in God. Further, one should not perceive flaws even in the devotees of God. …Regardless of whether you realize this fact today or you realize it after a hundred years, it must be realized. In fact, there is no alternative but to realize it and imbibe it firmly. Therefore, all devotees should remember this principle of mine and discuss it amongst each other. Furthermore, whenever someone suffers a setback due to some misunderstanding, he should be alerted by mentioning this. In fact, one should discuss this principle of mine routinely, at least once a day – this is my command. So please do not forget it; please, please, do not forget it!" (Vachanāmrut, Loyā 18).

In this way, Shriji Maharaj has clearly commanded that one should never assume that God and the devotees suffer from human traits. They should always be regarded as divine.

God and the Sadhu are divine and *nirgun*. Those who come into their contact also attain the *nirgun* state. Shriji Maharaj explains, "So, even though God assumes a human body, he is still divine, and the place where he resides is also *nirgun*. His clothes, jewellery, vehicles, attendants, food, drinks, etc. – in fact, any other objects which become associated with him – are all *nirgun*" (Vachanāmrut, Gadhadā II 13).

Shriji Maharaj repeats the same point in the Satsangijivan:

Divyam Krishnasya rupam bhavati cha
Satatam tasya loko'pi divyo
Divyā bhogāshcha bhogyānyapi cha
bhagawatastasya divyāni santi,
Divyā vai pārshadāshcha prakatita-
Nrutanoho shaktayastasya divyā
Divyā bhaktāshcha sarve jagati yadupatehe
Santi divyāhā kriyāshcha.

As God has a divine form in Akshardhām, similarly his human incarnation on earth

is always divine; his abode is divine; All his enjoyments are divine; the objects of his enjoyments are divine.

His *pārshads* are divine. His powers are also divine.

All his devotees are divine; and all his actions are divine.

- Satsangijivan 3.29.143

Shriji Maharaj believes Satsang to be divine, *brahmarup* and *mahāvishnurup*. Therefore, an aspirant should not dishonour the Sampradaya or its followers. They should be accepted as *'brahmani murti'* – images of Brahman. Nevertheless, it is not scepticism to dislike those who merely profess their faith in devotion of God, but are actually irreligious, violating the fivefold vows. They may appear innocent to conceal their weaknesses and they merely engage in satsang to serve their selfish ends or to gain a higher social standing.

True devotees, on the other hand, faithfully observe the fivefold vows, live in accordance with the prescribed religious codes, and thus offer worship. It is their insignificant lapses or idiosyncrasies which should be overlooked. And they should be treated as divine. With progressive realization of Shriji Maharaj's divinity, a follower of the Sampradaya will easily reach this stage. This principle can be best understood from Vachanāmruts, Gadhadā I 56, I 58, II 10, II 17, Panchālā 4 and Loyā 18.

3.10 Omniscience

The Vāyu Purāna describes the extraordinary characteristics of God. The foremost among these is omniscience.[4] The word omniscient is not to be taken merely literally, because omniscience is a trait of the *ishwars* as well as the *muktas*. The omniscience of Parameshwar, however, is quite different. He simultaneously knows about all the objects in countless worlds, about every *jiva*, the *ishwars*, infinite *muktas* in his divine abode and Mul Akshar. Precisely this is his omniscience.[5]

Within all souls dwells God as a witness – *sākshi*. Dwelling in their heart as a witness, he is aware of all their physical deeds and mental thoughts. He knows their past, present and future, as well as their virtues and vices, their disposition and desires. He also knows the motives of the *ishwars* regarding the creation, sustenance and dissolution of the cosmos.

2. Vachanāmruts, Gadhadā I 48, II 18, II 19, III 36.

3. Fools deride me when I descend in human form. They do not know my transcendental nature as the Lord of all.- Bhagavad Gitā 9.11

4. *Sarvagnatā truptiranā dibodhaha svatantratā nitya viluptadrishtihi,*
Ananta shaktishcha vibhorvibhugnāhā shadāhurangāni Maheshwarasya.

5. *Yo vetti yugapatsarvam pratyakshena sadā svataha .*

4. SARVOPARI:
God Is Supreme

4.1 Necessity of Faith in Divine Supremacy

Swaminarayan devotees accept the refuge of Bhagwan Swaminarayan with faith that he is God. We meditate on him and worship him as God. It is, however, of paramount importance for all followers of the Sampradaya to understand him as *sarvopari* – the supreme and highest, and the ultimate *avatāri* of all avatars – the cause of all incarnations.

With conviction of the supreme form of God, a devotee is freed from the cycles of birth and death. He realizes the difference between *ātmā* and *anātmā*. Shriji Maharaj says, "Rather, it is the extent of a person's faith in his *Ishtadev* – God – that determines how much distinction between *ātmā* and non-*ātmā* he cultivates. In fact, without using the strength of his *Ishtadev*, no spiritual endeavours can be fulfilled" (Vachanāmrut, Gadhadā I 56).

Shriji Maharaj stresses the importance of understanding the true glory of the divine form of God, "When you come to comprehend this fact, you will not encounter any difficulty in subduing the desires for the *panchvishays* and *swabhāvs* such as lust, anger, etc.; they will be subdued easily" (Vachanāmrut, Gadhadā II 13).

Gunatitanand Swami says, "Without knowing Maharaj as Purushottam, it is not possible to go to Akshardham" (Swāmini Vāto 3.12).

Shriji Maharaj therefore says, "The path of *jnān* should be understood in such a way that one does not malign the form of God in any way. …Therefore, one who is wise should certainly abide by God's commands to the best of one's ability. However, one should also intensely maintain the strength of conviction in God's form; i.e., 'I have attained the very form of God who reigns supreme, who forever possesses a divine form, and who is the '*avatāri*' – the cause of all of the avatars.' If a person realizes this, then even if he may have left the Satsang fellowship, his love for God's form will not diminish. In fact, even though he is out of Satsang at present, ultimately, when he leaves his body, he will go to God's Akshardhām and stay near God. On the other hand, a person may be in the Satsang fellowship at present, and he may even be abiding by the commands prescribed in the shastras, but if his conviction of God is not firm, then when he leaves his body, he will either go to the realm of Brahmā or to the realm of some other deity; but he will not go to the abode of Purushottam Bhagwan. Therefore, one should realize the manifest God that one has attained to forever possess a divine form and to be the '*avatāri*', the cause of all of the avatars. If, however, one does not realize this, and instead realizes God to be formless or like the other avatars, then that is regarded as committing blasphemy against God" (Vachanāmrut, Gadhadā II 9).

In the Vachanāmrut and other texts of the Sampradaya, Shriji Maharaj has been described as *sarvopari* – the transcendental highest, as the *avatāri* – the cause of all incarnations, and as Purna Purushottam Nārāyan. The following extracts will help one

to understand his supreme position.

4.2 Akshardhām: The Highest Abode; Shriji Maharaj: The Supreme

Akshardhām is the divine abode of Bhagwan Swaminarayan. It is distinct and above the abodes of other incarnations and deities. As ordained by God, other incarnations, devotees and deities reside in different abodes. Nishkulanand Swami explains:

Brahmā rākhyā Satyalokmā, Shivane rākhyā Kailās;
Vishnune rākhyā Vaikunthmā, ema āpyo jujavo nivās.
Indra rākhyo Amarāvati, Sheshjine rākhyā Pātāl;
Jyā jyā kari Harie āgnā, tiyā rahyā sukhe sadākāl.
Badritale rākhyā Rushishwar,
Nirannamukta rākhyā Shvetdweepmā;
Gopi-gopa rākhyā Goloke,
rākhyā mukta Akshar samipmā.

Brahmā's abode is Satyaloka. And Kailās is the abode of Shiva.

Vishnu's abode is Vaikunth. They each have separate abodes given by God.

Indra is placed in Amarāvati. And Sheshji's place is in Pātāl.

Wherever ordained by God, they happily live forever.

Rishishwar lives under Badri. The *nirannamuktas* stay in Shvetdwip.

The Gopas and Gopis are placed in Golok. The *akshar muktas* are in close proximity with God himself [in Akshardhām].

- Nishkulānand Kāvya, Vachan Vidhi 37

Barring Akshardhām, the remaining *lokas* are enwrapped in *māyā*, and are subject to the triple misfortunes. Sadguru Muktanand Swami says:

Chaud loka Vaikunth lagi, māyāni pāgi re;
Tethi anubhavi alagā rahe, traya tāp āgi re.

Vaikunth and the fourteen *lokas* are under the spell of *māyā*.

The wise shun them to escape from the triple misfortunes.

Akshardhām transcends *māyā* and hence is immune from the three types of miseries. The bliss in Akshardhām is therefore incomparable. Shriji Maharaj explains, "Moreover, the happiness of humans exceeds the happiness of animals; and the happiness of a king exceeds that; and the happiness of deities exceeds that; and the happiness of Indra exceeds that; then Bruhaspati's happiness, then Brahmā's, then Vaikunth's. Beyond that, the happiness of Golok is superior, and finally, the bliss of God's Akshardhām is far more superior" (Vachanāmrut, Panchālā 1).

Nishkulanand Swami also says:

Jeh Dhāmne pāmine prāni, pāchhu padvānu nathi re,
Sarve par chhe sukhni khāni, kevu kahie tene kathi re.
Anant mukta jyā ānande bhariyā, rahe chhe Prabhujini pās re,
Sukh sukh jyā sukhnā dariyā, tyā vasi rahyā vās re.
Evā Dhāmni āgal bijā, shi ganatimā ganāya re...

The ultimate divine abode is from where there is no return.

An indescribable reservoir of sublime happiness, it is beyond all.
Where, in close proximity of God, live infinite *muktas*; full of infinite bliss.
They live as if in the midst of oceans of utter happiness.
God's divine abode [Akshardhām] is unique and incomparable with other abodes.

- Chosath Padi 55-56

Therefore, Shriji Maharaj says that the bliss offered by his divine abode is so infinitely overwhelming that in comparison to it, the happiness offered by the *lokas* of the deities is described in Mokshadharma as utterly infernal and insignificant (Vachanāmruts, Sārangpur 1, 4, 11; Gadhadā III 28).

Apart from Akshardhām, all other abodes are perishable. Akshardhām is imperishable and eternal. Nishkulanand Swami says:

Mā'pralay kālanā agnimā sijā, hamesh je hanāya re,
Prakruti Purush pralaymā āve, bhav Brahmā na rahe koy re,
Chaud loka dhām rahevā na pāme, sarve sanhār hoy re.

In the scorching heat of the final destruction, the fourteen *lokas*, Bhav (Shiva), Brahmā and Prakriti Purush are all consumed.

- Chosath Padi 56

Shriji Maharaj also explains, "With the exception of God's Akshardhām, the form of God in that Akshardhām and his devotees in that Akshardhām, everything else – all of the realms, the deities, and the opulence of the deities – is perishable" (Vachanāmrut, Gadhadā II 24).

All other abodes are ephemeral. Eventually, the *jivas* have to return to the cycles of birth and death. Only from Akshardhām does a *mukta* never return:

Na tadbhāsayate suryo na shashānko na pāvakaha,
Yadgatvā na nivartante taddhāma paramam mamaH

The supreme abode is not illumined by the sun or the moon or the fire. Those who attain it never return to this material world.

- Bhagavad Gitā 15.6

The other abodes are influenced by the three *gunas* and *māyā* (e.g. the dispute between Radhikaji and Shridama in Golok is indicative of *tamoguna*. *Tamoguna* was also apparent in Jay and Vijay when they belittled Sanak and the sages in Vaikunth). It is only Akshardhām that is uninfluenced by the *gunas* or *māyā*.

Golok, Vaikunth and other abodes have specific dimensions according to scriptural descriptions. However, because of its vastness, Akshardhām is described as immeasurable and endless in all directions (Vachanāmrut, Loyā 14).

Other abodes abound with material objects such as diamond-studded palaces, jewels, etc. Akshardhām, however, is flooded with divine light. Purushottam, Akshar and the *akshar muktas* dwell within that divine light.

Shriji Maharaj describes his abode in Premanand Swami's kirtan, '*Bolyā Shri Hari re...*':

Māru Dhām chhe re, Ākshar amrut jenu nām;

Sarve sāmrathi re, shakti gune kari abhirām.
Ati tejomay re, ravi shashi kotik vārane jāy;
Shital shānt chhe re, tejni upamā nav devāy.

My abode is known as Akshar – the centre of nectarine sublimity.
It is supreme, and full of power and prosperity.
Shining with divine light, it is served by countless suns and moons;
Infinitely soothing light reigns supreme there.

- Sadguru Premanand Swami

Sadguru Nishkulanand Swami also writes:

Tej tej jiyā tej ambār, tejomay tan tenā re,
Tejomay jyā sarve ākār, shu kahiye sukh enā re.
Te tej madhye sinhāsan shobhe, tiyā bethā bahunāmi re,
Nishkulānand kahe man lobhe, Puran Purushottam pāmi re.

Flooded with divine light, the abode is extremely bright.
There, all the forms are full of light; the peace is indescribable.
At the centre of the light sits God on a dazzling throne.
Nishkulanand says – my mind is enchanted. I have met Purna Purushottam.

- Chosath Padi 55

In his talks, Gunatitanand Swami has clearly stated the superiority of Akshardhām over other abodes (Swāmini Vāto 3.11, 3.23, 3.49).

Shriji Maharaj also describes, in his own words, the superlative position of his divine abode, "The abode in the form of Akshar is the highest and beyond all" (*Vedras,* p.146).

In Samvat Year 1869 (1813 CE), Shriji Maharaj was bedridden. By his yogic powers, he visited various abodes, ultimately reaching Akshardhām. He describes the journey, "I went alone to the abode of Shri Purushottam Nārāyan, which transcends everything. There, I saw that it was I who was Purushottam; I did not see anyone eminent apart from myself. …Moreover, I will grant my supreme abode to all who come to my refuge and understand this" (Vachanāmrut, Ahmedābād 7).

Here, Shriji Maharaj has unambiguously described Akshar-dhām as the highest. That abode is his and he himself is supreme there. It is therefore but natural that God residing in such a transcendent and divine Akshardhām, should also be the highest, the supreme of all gods.

4.3 Shriji Maharaj: The Supreme

4.3.1 In His Own Words

At times, Shriji Maharaj has described his own supremacy. Normally, God – in human incarnation – conceals his divinity and limitless powers. He hesitates in speaking about his divine form because, "Upon discussing this topic, what if someone were to misunderstand it? What if, due to this discussion, any inclination that one may have firmly cultivated were to be destroyed, or even be uprooted? Yet, there is no

alternative but to reveal this fact. If one does not interpret it correctly, many problems can arise" (Vachanāmrut, Loyā 18).

Only after the sun rises can one appreciate the sun. Similarly, only when Purushottam Nārāyan identifies himself can one realize his divine glory.

We accept Shriji Maharaj as God. We worship him and offer our prayers to him. Honouring his words as self-evident and eternal truths, let us study them first.

In the old manuscripts written during his own lifetime, Maharaj reveals, "The earlier incarnations had a specific cause for a particular end. But my incarnation is to make the *jivas brahmarup* and allow them to attain ultimate liberation. For this noble mission, I – Purushottam – beyond even Akshar, have assumed human form."

Shri Krishna and other incarnations manifest to serve a specific purpose, such as defeating the demons. Having accomplished their mission, they departed from the world. But Bhagwan Swaminarayan incarnated to make the *jivas brahmarup* and to grant them ultimate liberation, thereby ensuring permanent liberation from the cycles of birth and death.

Therefore, Shriji Maharaj's manifestation on earth was for a higher mission than the other incarnations. Shriji Maharaj clearly mentions his supremacy in the Vachanāmrut,

"It is that same supreme Purushottam Bhagwan who manifests on this earth out of compassion – for the purpose of granting liberation to the *jivas*. He is presently visible before everyone; he is your *Ishtadev*; and he accepts your service. In fact, there is absolutely no difference between the manifest form of Purushottam Bhagwan visible before you and the form of God residing in Akshardhām; i.e., both are one. Moreover, this manifest form of Purushottam Bhagwan is the controller of all, including Akshar. He is the lord of all of the *ishwars* and the cause of all causes. He reigns supreme, and he is the cause of all of the avatars. Moreover, he is worthy of being worshipped single-mindedly by all of you. The many previous avatars of this God are worthy of being bowed down to and worthy of reverence" (Vachanāmrut, Gadhadā III 38).

"That uniform divine light is referred to as the *ātmā*, or Brahman or Akshardhām. The form of God within that light is called the essence of the *ātmā*, Parabrahman or Purushottam. ….Realize that the form amidst the divine light is this Maharaj visible before you" (Vachanāmrut, Gadhadā II 13).

"All of the avatars of God manifest from the very God [Shriji Maharaj] that is present in this Satsang fellowship. That is to say, he is the cause of all of the avatars and is the *antaryāmi* of all. It is he who, in Akshardhām, is radiant, full of countless powers and eternally has a form. He is also the lord of all of the lords of the countless *brahmānds*; he is even the cause of Aksharbrahman" (Vachanāmrut, Ahmedābād 6).

These words of Shriji Maharaj clearly explain the importance of firm faith in his supreme form. It is imperative for all seekers of liberation to develop such faith.

4.3.2 As Expressed in Swāmini Vāto

When God descends on earth for the liberation of the *jivas* and assumes human form, he is accompanied by his divine abode Akshardhām and the released *jivas* (Vachanāmrut, Gadhadā I 71).

Shriji Maharaj has also observed, “As he is in Akshar, he is not in Prakriti Purush.” This signifies that no one is in a better position than Aksharbrahman Gunatitanand Swami to explain his supreme glory. Gunatitanand Swami’s unambiguous and unequivocal talks – Swāmini Vāto – amply prove this. Every word in his talks testifies to Shriji Maharaj’s majestic glory.

Unafraid and uninhibited by scriptural dogmatism, Gunatitanand Swami openly proclaimed the sublime and supreme position of Maharaj.

When asked about the absence of scriptural references regarding Shriji Maharaj’s divine glory, Gunatitanand Swami used to reply, “How can there be a marriage of a person before his birth? Similarly, when Purushottam had not incarnated, how could his story possibly be written in the shastras?” (Swāmini Vāto 5.399).

Prior to Shriji Maharaj’s descent on earth, how could the shastras have mentioned him?

Gunatitanand Swami explains the significance of his talks in inspiring words: these talks “are as piercing as the sharpest of arrows”, “incisive as surgical instruments”, “dispel all doubts” and “are the talks of Purushottam himself ”.

Elated by the incessant flow of Gunatitanand Swami’s talks, Sadguru Gopalanand Swami expressed his joy, “In Vartal, we hear 25% of these talks, in Gadhadā, 50%. Only in Junagadh do we have the satisfaction of hearing them 100%.”

Some of these talks of Gunatitanand Swami which explain Shriji Maharaj’s supreme glory are presented below:

1. “Today, Purushottam has descended on earth with Akshar and the *muktas* of Akshardhām. *Ishwars* from innumerable abodes along with their *muktas* have also accompanied them. Why? They have come to remove their own deficiencies and to understand the divine form of Purushottam” (Swāmini Vāto 3.41).

One of the six objectives of Shriji Maharaj’s manifestation on this earth was, “To explain by divine discourses, his supreme form and *upāsanā* to countless incarnations and their followers, so that they may attain Akshardhām.”[6]

1. “There is nothing more to understand and this is all that needs to be understood, know Maharaj as Purushottam [supreme God] and this Sadhu as Akshar” (Swāmini Vāto 3.38).
2. “Without knowing Maharaj as Purushottam, it is not possible to go to Akshardham. And without becoming *brahmarup*, it is not possible to stay in the service of Maharaj. Then Shivlāl asked a question, “How should Maharaj as Purushottam be known? And how can one become *brahmarup?*” Then Swami said, “Know that Maharaj is supreme, the source of all avatars and the cause of all causes.” Based on this, he had Vachanāmruts, Gadhadā II 9 and Gadhadā III 38 read and said, “Today, in Satsang, the sadhus, *āchāryas*, mandirs and *murtis* are all supreme. So what is there to say in Maharaj being

supreme? One should understand that he is definitely supreme" (Swāmini Vāto 3.12).

3. "All avatars are like magnets. Some of them weigh several kilogrammes, some tens of kilogrammes, some hundreds of kilogrammes and some hundreds of thousands of kilogrammes. Of them, a magnet weighing several kilogrammes attracts the metal of this mandir; a magnet weighing tens of kilogrammes attracts the metal of the entire city; a magnet weighing hundreds of kilogrammes attracts the metal of the whole country; and a magnet weighing hundreds of thousands of kilogrammes attracts metal of an entire region. And today, a whole mountain of magnet has come, otherwise how would the whole universe be attracted?" With this, Swami said, "*Jivas* are drawn to previous avatars according to their powers. And today the source of all avatars, the cause of all causes, Purushottam, has come. And seeing him, the lords of countless abodes and the liberated souls in them are drawn to Maharaj's *murti;* just as on encountering a mountain of magnet, the nails of a ship are attracted" (Swāmini Vāto 3.4).
4. "There are three grades of snake charmers, *vādi, fulvādi* and *gārdi.* Of these, a *vādi* captures meek snakes; a *fulvādi* captures those which are easy to catch, otherwise uses a cloth tie to kill them; and before a *gārdi* all types of snakes, even cobras, dance. The principle of this is, like the first type of snake charmer – *vādi* – Dattatreya and Kapil liberate the aspirants. Rama and Krishna, like the second – *fulvādi* – liberate those who abide by their dictates; otherwise they wield the sword to settle the point. Maharaj, however, is like the *gārdi*, the third type of snake-charmer. *Jivas, ishwars,* Purush, Akshar and others are all standing before him with folded hands" (Swāmini Vāto 3.5).
5. "Previously, many great avatars have incarnated. Compared to them, when I look at the children of these *satsangis* I see that they have tens of millions of times greater divinity than them. So, how can the glory of the great devotees, the great Sadhus and Maharaj even be described?" (Swāmini Vāto 3.72).
6. "Actually, first Ganesh is described as a god; then Brahmā, Vishnu and Shiva are described; Aniruddha, Pradyumna and Sankarshan are also described as gods, then who out of them should be believed as God? The explanation for this is that there are tens of millions of classes of *jivas*, *ishwars,* Brahmās. The cause of them all is Maharaj himself. When one understands like this, then an answer can be said to have been given. There are countless Ramas, countless Krishnas and countless *akshar muktas* – and the creator of them all, the supporter of them all, the controller of them all and the cause of them all is Maharaj. If he is understood in this way, then spiritual wisdom is attained" (Swāmini Vāto 6.254).
7. "What is the difference between a devotee of Purushottam and devotees of other avatars? The difference is comparable to that between the cub of an elephant and a louse" (Swāmini Vāto 2.107).

8. "Despite all the discourses of Shri Krishna, Uddhava alone managed to renounce the world. Today, however, even teenagers renounce the worldly life to become sadhus. The shastras do not mention anyone renouncing women. Today however, thousands renounce women. The shastras cite only two or three instances where God appeared before devotees on their deathbeds. But today, God appears to call all the devotees when they pass away. The previous incarnations are like *pārasmani,* but Purushottam is like *chintāmani*" (Swāmini Vāto 2.169).
9. On many occasions, Gunatitanand Swami explained the distinction between avatar and *avatāri* using these analogies: the archer and the arrow are separate. One should know that the archer is the cause of the arrow. However, the distinction between avatar and *avatāri* is not like the different guises of an actor on a stage. Just as there is a sharp difference between a sovereign emperor and a subordinate chieftain, there is a difference between avatar and *avatāri*. It is against the spirit of the shastras to treat all avatars and all sadhus as equal.
10. "The bleating of hundreds of thousands of goats incites no fear at all. But the roar of merely one lion is terrifying and can tear apart an elephant's temple. Similarly, there is no problem in describing Maharaj as similar to other avatars. But to proclaim that all the avatars owe their powers to Maharaj and have attained their present state by worshipping him is as intimidating as a lion's frightening roar is to an elephant" (Swāmini Vāto 5.197).

4.3.3 In the Words of the Paramhansas

Attracted by the divine and glorious personality of Shriji Maharaj, many of the *paramhansas* unreservedly accepted his supremacy. Others accepted him initially as God, but on realizing his immense glory and superhuman deeds, they started trusting his words and gradually came to acknowledge his divine supremacy. Their realization of Shriji Maharaj's supremacy has been incorporated in the words of their kirtans and shastras, as exemplified in the following excerpts:

1. In all his literary works, Nishkulanand Swami has described Shriji Maharaj in glowing terms – as Purna Purushottam, the ultimate *avatāri* of all avatars:

(A)

Adya madhya antye avatar, thayā aganit thāshe apār,
Pan sarvenā kāran jeh, teto Swami Sahajānand eh.

At the beginning, the middle and the end of creation, countless avatars have incarnated and will incarnate.

But the prime cause of them all is one and only one – Swami Sahajanand.

- Nishkulānand Kāvya, Avatar Chintāmani 32

(B)

Vidhipar te Virāt kahi e, te par Pradhān Purush lahie;
Te par mul Prakruti Purush, tethi par Akshar sujash.
Akshar par Purushottam jeh, tene dharyu manushyanu deh;
Tenu darshan ne sparsh kyāthi, sahu vichārone manmāthi.
Je chhe man vānine agam, te to āj thayā chhe sugam;

Beyond Brahmā is Virāt. Beyond Virāt is Pradhān Purush.

Beyond Pradhān Purush is Mul Prakriti Purush. And beyond him is majestic Akshar; Beyond Akshar is Purushottam, who has descended in human form.

Just think – could we ever have seen or touched him?

The one who is beyond words and thoughts, he has become easily accessible to us today.

- Bhaktachintāmani 77

(C)

Pachhi boliyā Prānjivan, tame sāmbhalajyo sahu jan,
Tamane je mali chhe murati, tene Nigam kahe neti neti...
Ati apār Aksharātit, thai tamāre te sāthe prit,
Bhakta jaktamāhi chhe jo ghanā, upāsak avatar tanā.
Je je murati janane bhāve, te murati nijadhām pahochāve,
Pan sarve pār je prāpati, te chhe tamāre kahe Prānpati.

Then addressing them, Shriji Maharaj said, "All of you listen carefully.

Though the Vedas say, 'He is not, he is not', he is very much before you in human form.

You are associated with him, who is immeasurable and beyond Akshar.

Many devotees on this earth worship various avatars.

They, in turn, help their followers to attain their respective abodes.

What you have attained is unsurpassable, and beyond their reach," so said Shriji Maharaj.

- Bhaktachintāmani 79

(D)

Nishkulanand Swami sings of Shriji Maharaj's supremacy in Purushottam Prakāsh:

Purushottam pragati re...
Kalash chadāvyo kalyānano re, sahunā mastak par mod;
Dhanya dhanya ā avatārne re, jovā rākhi nahi jod...
Dhāmi je Akshardhāmnā re, tene āpyo chhe ānand;...
Bandh kidhā bijā bāranā re, ve'ti kidhi Akshar vāt...
Ashādhi meghe āvi karyā re, jhājhā bijā jhākal;...

The advent of Purushottam marked the pinnacle of liberation as if everyone has a crown on their heads.

Blessed and unparalleled is this incarnation.

The supreme God of Akshardhām has given divine joy in abundance.

All other doors are closed, but the royal road to Akshardhām has been laid wide

open.

Before the torrential rains of Ashādh, all others are like dew.

- Nishkulānand Kāvya, Purushottam Prakāsh 55

Shriji Maharaj is compared in the simile with the heavy downpour of the month of Ashādh which blossoms the whole earth. The other avatars are compared to dew which cannot affect the earth. In such words, Nishkulanand Swami has sung the divine glory of his supreme master.

(2)

Sahajānand Swāmi re, Pote Parabrahma chhe re,
Swāminārāyan jenu nām re.

Sahajanand Swami himself is Parabrahman.

His name is Swaminarayan.

- Sadguru Muktanand Swami

(3)

Divya chaitanya Akshar jenu ghar chhe jo,
Kshar Akshar thaki e to par chhe jo.

Full of divine consciousness is his abode Akshardhām.

He is beyond *kshar* and Akshar.

- Sadguru Premanand Swami

(4)

Koti Vishnu Brahmā kar jodi, Shankar koti surat āni,
Shārdā Shesh aru Nārad barane, nahi mānat nar abhimāni.
Parabrahma Puran Purushottam, Swāminārāyan sumarāni,
Sukhānand sharane sukh pāyo, bhajan bharosā ur āni.

Millions of Brahmās and Vishnus respectfully fold their hands; Millions of Shivas, Shārdā, Shesha and Narad meditate, but the egoists still have no faith.

Remembering Parabrahman Purna Purushottam Swami-narayan, Sukhanand is very elated. And holding fast to this faith, he sings his praises.

- Sadguru Sukhanand Swami

The poems of the eight *paramhansa*-poets as well as *Haridigvijay* written by the great scholar sadhu Nityanand Swami, and the monumental Shri Harililākalpataru composed by Acharya Shri Raghuvirji Maharaj and Achintyanand Brahmachari at the inspiration of Gunatitanand Swami contain numerous references of Shriji Maharaj's supreme status.

Firmly convinced of the supreme position of Shriji Maharaj, the *paramhansas* had no interest in anything up to Prakriti Purush. Therefore, when Shriji Maharaj considered sending Sadguru Swarupanand Swami to Golok, the latter forcefully replied, "I am already lying in that pit!"

4.4 Cosmic Evolution

Let us now examine the phases of cosmic evolution to understand the supreme position of Shriji Maharaj.

While explaining cosmic evolution, Shriji Maharaj has clearly distinguished the position of different deities, *ishwars*, their evolution, etc. Philosophically, there are five *anādi bheds* – eternal realities. *Jivas* are born in any one of four categories: *udbhij, jarāyuj, swedaj* and *andaj* – i.e., born from earth, womb, sweat or egg – and include Indra and other *devas* and all *jivas*. All entities from Brahmā, Vishnu, Mahesh to Pradhan Purush are included in the *ishwar* category. *Māyā* is the *shakti* of God. *Māyā* merges in the light of Aksharbrahman.

Shriji Maharaj says, "From the Vedas, the Purāns, the Itihās and the Smrutis, I have formed the principle that *jiva*, *māyā*, *ishwar*, Brahman and Parabrahman are all eternal. Consider it as follows: *Māyā* represents the soil; the *jivas* represent the seeds in the soil; and *ishwar*, the rain. By the will of God, an *ishwar* – in the form of Purush – unites with *māyā*. Subsequently, just as the seeds in the soil sprout by the association of rainwater, similarly, the *jivas*, which are eternal, arise from within *māyā*; but new *jivas* are not created. Therefore, just as *ishwar* is eternal, *māyā* is also eternal. The *jivas* residing in *māyā* are also eternal, and they are not components of God; they are always *jivas*. When a *jiva* seeks the refuge of God, it overcomes God's *māyā*, becomes *brahmarup* like Narad and the Sanakādik, attains the abode of God, and becomes his attendant. This is my principle" (Vachanāmrut, Gadhadā III 10).

"Following the dissolution of the *brahmānds*, it is only this incarnate God who remains. Also, it is this same God who, at the time of creation, creates countless millions of *brahmānds* through Prakruti and Purush" (Vachanāmrut, Gadhadā I 56).

As willed by God, evolution and dissolution take place, as confirmed by the Shruti:

Tadaikshata bahu syām prajāyeyeti

- Chāndogya Upanishad 4.2.3

Shriji Maharaj explains the process of evolution in the Vachanāmrut, "At the time of creation, Purushottam Bhagwan – who transcends even Akshar – inspires Akshar. As a result, Purush manifests from Akshar.[7] After entering Akshar, Purushottam enters Purush, and in the form of Purush, inspires Prakruti. In this way, as Purushottam successively entered the various entities, the activities of creation took place. Thereafter, Pradhān-Purushes were produced from Prakruti-Purush. From Pradhān-Purush, *mahattattva* was produced. From *mahattattva,* the three types of *ahamkār* were produced. From *ahamkār*, the *bhutas*, the *vishays*, the *indriyas*, the *antahkarans* and their presiding deities were produced. From those, Virāt-Purush was produced. From the lotus extending from his naval, Brahmā was produced. From that Brahmā, Marichi and other *prajāpatis* were produced. From them, Kashyap and other *prajāpatis* were produced. From them, Indra and other deities, the demons, and all of the mobile and immobile creation were produced" (Vachanāmrut, Gadhadā I 41). This process is illustrated in the chart on page 50.

When Parabrahman Paramātmā desires to create the universe, he looks at his eternal devotee Akshar. Knowing his master's – Parabrahman Paramātmā's – wish,

Akshar looks at Purush *(akshar mukta* or *akshar purush)* and inspires him to abide by the will of Purushottam. Therefore, this Mul Purush, to fulfil Parabrahman's desire, unites with Mahāmāyā (Prakriti) resulting in infinite Pradhān-Purush pairs, which had until then been lying dormant in *māyā* since the time of dissolution. Thus, through Pradhān and Purush, the entire cosmos comes into existence.

Aksharātmak (Mul) Purush inspires Prakriti in as much as he, as Purush, inspires his *shakti* in Mahāmāyā – moving her from the state of complete tranquillity or equilibrium (*sāmyavasthā*) to one of activity. By the union of Purush and Prakriti, infinite pairs of Pradhān and Purush are formed to create infinite cosmoses. In this manner, as the presence of Purushottam – by his *antaryāmi shakti* – began to be felt gradually, life began to flourish.

Referring to Aksharātmak Purush – also known as an *aksharrup mukta* of Akshardhām – Shriji Maharaj says, "That Purush is desireless, he is a *mukta,* he is *brahmarup* and he is the cause of *māyā.* Although he stays within *māyā,* he still remains unaffected by *māyā.* Also, he has no desire to enjoy *māyā* since he is content due to the bliss of Brahman; thus, he is fulfilled" (Vachanāmrut, Gadhadā II 31).

The majority of shastras refer to this Purush as Purushottam. It is therefore difficult to realize that Parabrahman Purushottam is different from Purush. Consequently, confusion arises regarding Purushottam. But in the Vachanāmrut, Shriji Maharaj clarifies, "Just as there is a difference between the *jiva* and Virāt-Purush, who is an *ishwar*; and just as there is also a difference between *ishwar* and Purush, similarly, there is an immense difference between Purush and Vāsudev Bhagwan – Purushottam. Purushottam Vāsudev Bhagwan is the master of all, whereas there are many such *brahmarup,* Akshar-like Purushes who worship the holy feet of Vāsudev and who offer praise to him. …I have explained this fact in this way many times, but it is not firmly fixed in one's heart due to a lack of deep contemplation. As a result, after listening to the words of the shastras, no stability remains in one's understanding" (Vachanāmrut, Gadhadā II 31).

This chain of evolution clearly demonstrates that Shriji Maharaj himself – as Parabrahman Purushottam – is the inspirer, the *antaryāmi* and the prime cause of creation. Listening to this elucidation by Shriji Maharaj, Sadguru Premanand Swami has written in his kirtan, '*Bolyā Shri Hari re…*':

Jiva ishwar tano re, māyā kāla Purush Pradhān,
Saune vash karu re, sauno prerak hu Bhagwān.
Aganit vishvani re, utpatti pālan pralay thāy,
Māri marji vinā re, koithi taranu nav todāy.
The inspirer of jiva, ishwar, māyā, kāla, Purush, Pradhān,
I control them all. I am God.
I create, sustain and dissolve countless worlds.
Without my will, no one can pluck even a blade of grass.

- Sadguru Premanand Swami

4.5 Parabrahman Purushottam Nārāyan: One And Unique

We have seen from the above account that Parabrahman Purushottam Nārāyan is the supreme, the cause of all avatars, the ultimate cause of all causes and the controller of all. There is only one Parabrahman. That Parabrahman is Bhagwan Swaminarayan. He is one and incomparable. And no power – not even Akshar – is capable of becoming Parabrahman. The scriptural confirmation in this regard, is as follows:

The Shrutis pronounce:

Ekamevādvitiyam Brahma

God is only one and unique.

Clarifying this basic principle, Shriji Maharaj says, "Only God is like God (Nārāyan); no one can become like him" (Vachanāmruts, Loyā 13, Kāriyāni 8, Kāriyāni 10).

"Only God is like God. Many have attained qualities similar to his by worshipping him, yet they certainly do not become like God" (Vachanāmrut, Gadhadā III 39).

"After all, there is only one form of God. This God is extremely powerful and no one, including Akshar, is capable of becoming like him. This is an established principle" (Vachanāmrut, Loyā 4).

The *Upanishads* also reiterate this point:

Na tatsamashchāpyadhikashcha drishyate

None can ever equal or surpass Parabrahman.

- Shvetāshvatara Upanishad 6.8;
Bhavasambhava Samhitā Upanishad 2.24

4.6 Well-Known Incidents

4.6.1 Shriji Maharaj's Supremacy: As Understood from His Incidents

1. A Brahmin aspirant by the name of Shitaldas had heard about the admirable work of Ramanand Swami and came for his darshan. Unfortunately, Ramanand Swami had passed away just a few days before Shitaldas's arrival. He was therefore very disappointed and thought of going back. At that moment, Shriji Maharaj graced him with samadhi – a divine trance – in which he had the darshan of Ramanand Swami and the 24 avatars praying to Shriji Maharaj. In this state of trance, Shitaldas performed puja of Shriji Maharaj with love. He also had an intense desire to offer puja to the infinite *muktas* residing in Akshardhām.

Realizing his desire, Shriji Maharaj asked him to think, "If any one of the incarnations or if Ramanand Swami happens to be Purushottam, then may I assume infinite forms." In spite of such a wish, Shitaldas failed to assume infinite forms.

Shriji Maharaj then said, *"Chintvan evu muj vishe, have karo kahe Parmesh..."* (Now you may think on the same lines about me...).

Shitaldas did as instructed and imagined, "If Shriji Maharaj is Purushottam, may I assume infinite forms." The moment Shitaldas thought of this, he was able to assume countless forms and performed the puja of infinite *muktas* simultaneously. Coming out of the trance, Shitaldas prayed to Shriji Maharaj. He was immediately convinced of the supremacy of Shriji Maharaj and lost all interest in worldly affairs. He was soon initiated as a sadhu by Shriji Maharaj and was renamed Vyapakanand Swami. It has been described in the Harililāmrut:

"Sarva avatar emā samāy, pote koi mā lin na thāy,
Evi vāt kahi jeh vār, thayā lin badhā avatar."

"All the incarnations merge in him, but he does not merge in anybody.
The moment this was said, all the incarnations merged in him."

- Harililāmrut 5.3

2. Parvatbhai of Agatrai was a dedicated devotee of Shriji Maharaj. Once while ploughing his field, he was engrossed in meditating on Maharaj, and had the darshan of his radiant form. Subsequently he had the darshan of all the 24 incarnations one after another, and saw all of them merge into Shriji Maharaj's divine form. Parvatbhai was immensely pleased by this darshan. This incident demonstrates that only one who is all-powerful and the highest can merge others into himself.

By sending learned and illiterate devotees and non-devotees, and even animals and birds into divine trance, Shriji Maharaj manifested his spiritual powers and convinced others of his supremacy. Followers of different faiths also went into trance and had the darshan of the deities they were worshipping. In trance, they also saw all these deities merging into Shriji Maharaj. Attracted by his sublime glory, aspirants from all over India came and sought his refuge.

Vachanāmrut, Panchālā 6 also mentions a similar point. Shri Krishna exhibited the glory of all the previous incarnations. Therefore, his superiority over them is acknowledged in the shastras. Similarly, Shriji Maharaj manifested his spiritual powers by merging into himself all the previous incarnations – including that of Shri Krishna. Shriji Maharaj therefore proved his supreme nature.

Describing the thirteen facets of Shriji Maharaj's extraordinary spirituality, Sadguru Gopalanand Swami writes, "Many people observed the merging of the other incarnations into Shriji Maharaj's *murti*. However the striking feature of Dharmasut (son of Dharmadev – Shriji Maharaj) is that he himself did not merge into other incarnations."[8]

3. After Ramanand Swami passed away, Shriji Maharaj revealed his supreme glory on many occasions. In Loj and Mangrol, he also blessed countless people with samadhi. Soon after Maharaj was appointed as guru of the Sampradaya, Bhimbhai, a devout follower from Kalvani requested Maharaj, "When a new king is enthroned, all the prisoners are set free. You are the ultimate *avatāri* of all avatars. To commemorate this joyous event, kindly free all the *jivas* who are condemned to suffer the tortures of Hell."

Moved by Bhimbhai's prayer, Shriji Maharaj sent Swarupanand Swami into trance to Yamapuri (Hell). Deeply touched by the piteous wailing of the *jivas* in Yamapuri, Swarupanand Swami felt sorry for them. He asked them to chant the name of Swaminarayan. By chanting this divine mantra, all the *jivas* were instantly freed from the torments of Hell. They all assumed four-armed forms and transmigrated to the *loka* of Bhumāpurush. Thus, Shriji Maharaj also manifested his infinite powers through his *paramhansas*.

Muktanand Swami has narrated this incident in the following kirtan:

Pote Parabrahma re, Swami Sahajānand,
Nārāyan prabal pratāp chhe.
Swaminarayan mukhe uchchare,
Tene janmamaran Jamno bhay jāy,
Sarve naraknā kund khāli thayā,
Bhukhyā Jamgana re kar ghasi pastāy.
Sahajānand Swami re, Na pragatat ā same re,
Prāni koi pāmat nahi bhavpār...

Swami Sahajanand himself is Parabrahman Nārāyan with great powers.

He who utters the name of Swaminarayan is freed from the vicious cycles of birth and death, and the clutches of Yama.

All the pits in Hell have been emptied; the hungry hell-wardens are wringing their hands in despair.

Had Sahajanand Swami not descended on earth in our times,

No soul would have been freed from the relentless wheel of births and deaths.

On the same theme, Nishkulanand Swami has also written:

Jiva sayamni e (Yamapurimā) shid jāy re,
Pragat Prabhu chhe pruthvi māy re....
Bese rājā gādi par koy re,
Chhode bandhivānanā bandh soy re;
Tem bandhthi chhodyā bahu jan re,
Pote pragat Shri Bhagwān re;
Mahā moto pratāp pragatāvi re,
Rit nautam nyāri chalāvi re;
Jene upar nahi bijo koy re,
Te to jem kare tem hoy re;
Saunā nāth niyantā Swami re,
Sau dhāmatanā pan Dhāmi re;
Te to adhalak āj dhaliyā re,
Thayā sukhi jan jene maliyā re.

When God in human form has manifested on earth, why should a *jiva* be consigned to Hell?

When a king is enthroned, all the prisoners are set free from their bondage.

Similarly, manifest God has released many *jivas*.

Demonstrating his immeasurable glory, he has blazed a new trail.

No one is above or beyond him; whatever happens is according to his will.

He governs all and is the lord of all the abodes.

He [Maharaj] is now showering his pleasure; whoever has met him experiences divine bliss.

4. When Shriji Maharaj had the Satsangijivan shastra written in Gadhada, a lengthy debate on *upāsanā* took place. Nityanand Swami insisted on describing Shriji Maharaj

as supreme, the ultimate *avatāri* of all avatars, and the final cause of all causes. The other *paramhansas,* however, were in favour of depicting Shriji Maharaj as equal to Shri Krishna. Nityanand Swami forcefully pointed out Shriji Maharaj's merging of the 24 incarnations into himself, and other evidence of Maharaj's limitless divine glory. He pleaded that equating Shriji Maharaj with the previous avatars amounted to denial of his omnipotence and supreme glory.

Shriji Maharaj, however, sided with the rest of the *paramhansas* by affirming, "Write that I am on par with Shri Krishna. Nothing more should be written." Shriji Maharaj had a long drawn-out debate with Nityanand Swami regarding this matter, but Nityanand Swami refused to change his stance. Following this, Nityanand Swami was excommunicated and Maharaj stopped talking to him. Despite this humiliation, Nityanand Swami remained firm in his understanding about Maharaj's supreme nature. After seven days, Maharaj called him and praised his understanding. As a token of his appreciation, he garlanded Nityanand Swami, adding, "A true *upāsak* should have understanding like Nityanand Swami. Although I sided with the other *paramhansas* and he was insulted, he refused to give up his correct understanding." This incident clearly illustrates Shriji Maharaj's supremacy.

Despite this, some of the leading *paramhansas* remained hesitant in publicly declaring Shriji Maharaj as God and as supreme. They had apprehensions that such portrayal lacked scriptural confirmation and would not be widely accepted. Consequently, their inflexible views prevailed and Shriji Maharaj was placed on the same level as Shri Krishna in the Satsangijivan shastra. At that time Shriji Maharaj said that shastras describing his supreme glory would be composed at a later date and also his *murti* would be consecrated.

On many occasions, Shriji Maharaj had said that had he asked Gunatitanand Swami and Nishkulanand Swami to study Sanskrit, there would have been a large scale acceptance of this principle by followers of the Sampradaya. There would have been no need for a scholar such as Dinanath Bhatt, and the divine glory and majestic powers of his form would have been written exactly as they were.

5. In the course of his travels in the teenage-yogi form of Nilkanth Varni, Shriji Maharaj arrived in the village of Loj. At the time, Ramanand Swami was staying in Bhuj. Ramanand Swami was well aware of Nilkanth Varni's eminence. He therefore instructed all his disciples to visit Loj for Varni's darshan. Lalji Suthar of Shekhpat (later Nishkulanand Swami), however, had an irresistible attraction for his guru, Ramanand Swami. Therefore, instead of going to Loj, he decided to go to Bhuj. There, Ramanand Swami asked him, "Disregarding my orders, why did you come here? Varni is extremely great and worthy of darshan."

Thereupon Lalji Bhakta inquired, "How eminent is this Varni? Can he be compared to you?"

Ramanand Swami replied, "Varni is superior to me and even superior to Shri Krishna. He is the cause of all avatars, greatest of the great, endowed with all divine virtues and powers. He himself is Purushottam." In this way, Ramanand Swami explained at length the supremacy of Shriji Maharaj and rebuked Lalji Bhakta for not

going to Loj.

This incident has been described in the Harililāmrut (4.3):

Kahe Lālji te motā kevā, Dattātri ke Rushabhdev jevā;
Ke shu chhe Rāmchandra samān, Rāmānand kahe suno kān.
Jem Krushna motā saravethi, Tem ā chhe motā vali ethi;
Ā chhe avatārnā avatāri, Ghanu shu kahie vistāri...
Evā motānā darshan muki, Kem āvyā chho Kachchhmā chuki?

Lalji asks, "How great is he? Is he like Dattatreya or Rishabhdev?
Or is he comparable to Ramachandra?"
Ramanand replies, "Please listen carefully,
Krishna is greater than all other [avatars].
He [Varni] is greater than even Krishna.
He is the ultimate *avatāri* of all avatars. There is no need to elaborate any further.
Leaving aside his darshan, why have you come to Kutch?"

6. Once Shriji Maharaj, tongue-in-cheek, told the *paramhansas*, "When you go to preach from village to village, explain that I am on par with Dattatreya, Kapil, Narad, Shuk, Sanak and others. But in no case should you say that I am superior to them." The *paramhansas* agreed. When they returned to Gadhpur following their preaching visits to various regions, Shriji Maharaj asked them, "How did you introduce me?"

The *paramhansas* replied, "Maharaj, we introduced you to be as great as Dattatreya, Kapil, Narad, Shuk, Sanak and others."

Disappointed by their reply, Shriji Maharaj said, "Truly, you are simpletons like doves. You have stayed with me for such a long time. You have been a witness to my remarkable deeds, yet why do you still remain unaware of my true form? What has been carefully heard and seen can always be regurgitated. Are you unable to talk about my divine glory in your sermons? I am the *avatāri* of all avatars, the supreme Purushottam. Please imbibe and propagate this knowledge."

With folded hands, the *paramhansas* apologized, "Maharaj, we will understand your supremacy as such, and also explain it to others."

7. Once Laduba, Jivuba and other devotees in Gadhada told Shriji Maharaj, "Maharaj, we are indeed very fortunate to have met the same God who was with the Gopis and Govāls."

Shriji Maharaj immediately clarified, "The God, whom the Gopis and Govāls had met, has not even been blessed with the darshan of this *murti* yet. What you have attained is beyond description."

8. When the *murtis* of Nar-Nārāyan Dev were consecrated in Ahmedabad, Shriji Maharaj said to Anandanand Swami, "Nar-Nārāyan is the king of Bharatkhand. We have consecrated his *murti*. Nar-Nārāyan incarnate resides in Badrikāshram and Lakshmi-Nārāyan resides in Vaikunth. They, along with other deities, offer their *upāsanā* to this *pragat* Purushottam [Swaminarayan], and serve him." With these words, Shriji Maharaj explained his position as Purushottam.

9. Although Shriji Maharaj lived in Saurashtra, he became well-known throughout the whole of India. People talked about the new faith started by 'Jivanmukta' (one who grants liberation in this very life) in western India. By merely uttering the word 'Jivanmukta', the surroundings glowed with light. Everyone wondered that if the name itself was so impressive, how wonderful would he be in person? Many were attracted from all corners of the country and came to Saurashtra to join the Sampradaya. Some of these disciples were previously powerful heads of sects and monasteries. With their band of disciples, they sought refuge in Shriji Maharaj.

When Shriji Maharaj was only 23 years old, he initiated 500 aspirants as *paramhansas* in a single night, many of whom were senior in age, great scholars, ascetics, and extremely brilliant. This incident illustrates his majestic awe, enchanting personality and his boundless energy. These *paramhansas* were no ordinary people. Many were experts in literature, music, sculpture, painting, dance and other fields; others were erudite and affluent. What was the charisma of this young man that the *paramhansas* renounced their homes, families, wealth, status and their fixed notions of caste to fall at his lotus feet? This single act of Maharaj is in itself an eloquent testimony of his divine supremacy.

The *paramhansas* had an unshakeable conviction of Shriji Maharaj's supremacy. Shriji Maharaj once put them to the test by asking, "O *paramhansas*, the previous incarnations destroyed many demons and accomplished wonderful feats. On the other hand, I have not done anything to merit the honour of being called God. I have not churned the ocean, nor have I liquidated the Kshatriyas from the face of the earth. I have neither conquered demons like Ravan, nor have I built a bridge over the ocean. Neither have I lifted Mt. Govardhan, nor have I destroyed Jarāsandh. I have not performed such heroic acts. Yet, why do you call me God? You must certainly be mistaken."

The *paramhansas,* however, were not the type to be misled by Maharaj's testing words. Their conviction remained unwavering. They replied, "Maharaj! If the sky says that it is not the sky and if the sun says that it is not the sun, who will believe them? God is simply divine. Whatever he may say, we are unlikely to be fooled. You may not have destroyed the demons. But they were already destroyed by their passion, anger, greed, infatuation, jealousy, ego, etc. These vices are such that they can precipitate one's downfall from Swargalok, Vidhilok or Vaikunth. You have emancipated us from these deadly vices."

Māte ene diye ja vidāri, te to avatārnā avatāri.

He who can uproot vices, he is the ultimate *avatāri* of all avatars.

- Bhaktachintāmani 105

"You have liberated the pious as well as the impious. You may not have built a bridge across the ocean; but you have built a bridge that helps one to cross the turbulent ocean of worldly life, and leads one onto the path to Akshardhām. You have freed us from the bondage of *māyā* and helped us to attain Akshardhām" (Bhaktachintāmani 104-5).

Shriji Maharaj was extremely pleased to hear these words of unflinching faith from

the *paramhansas*.

4.6.2 Shriji Maharaj's Supremacy: As Explained by Aksharbrahman Gunatitanand Swami

The inspiring words of Aksharbrahman Gunatitanand Swami acted as a catalyst in propagating the correct understanding of Shriji Maharaj's supremacy in Satsang. In the absence of such understanding, it is not possible to transcend the dense darkness of *māyā*. Precisely for this reason, Shriji Maharaj appeared to Sadguru Gopalanand Swami in a dream in Umreth and told him, "Spread the knowledge of my supremacy as Purushottam; otherwise, I will keep you in this human body for a thousand years."

1. Whenever Sadguru Gopalanand Swami explained the distinction between avatars and their ultimate cause, *avatāri*, Mota Atmanand Swami, who was senior in age, used to remark, "Boy! Do not indulge in comparisons of God."

Gopalanand Swami used to reply with a smile, "Swami, today you may not understand what I am saying, but in the future, some sadhu will come and explain this truth to you."

When Atmanand Swami reached the age of 116, he wondered, "I have no desires yet why has Maharaj still not come to take me to his divine abode of Akshardhām?"

At that time, he met Gunatitanand Swami who recalled various incidents wherein Shriji Maharaj had told Atmanand Swami in person about his supremacy. Gunatitanand Swami emphasized the importance of understanding the supreme *upāsanā*. As a result of these talks, imperfections in Atmanand Swami's knowledge of *upāsanā* were removed, following which Maharaj took him to Akshardhām.

Thus, many a senior sadhu had the benefit of such talks given by Gunatitanand Swami.

2. While bathing, Sadguru Muktanand Swami used to recite the names of various places of pilgrimage. Through Shantanand Swami, a disciple of Muktanand Swami, Gunatitanand Swami said, "The name of Swaminarayan is supreme and its chanting covers all the holy places." Muktanand Swami soon realized this and duly corrected his recitation.

3. Whenever Sadguru Premanand Swami stayed in Junagadh, he often sang devotional songs narrating the pastimes of Shri Krishna. Gunatitanand Swami often reminded him, "Swami, this body will not stay too long. Therefore, leave aside the pastimes of Krishna and contemplate on the pastimes of Shriji Maharaj."

4. Only when Gunatitanand Swami explained Vachanāmrut, Gadhadā II 9 to Sadguru Shukanand Swami did the latter realize the divine supremacy of Shriji Maharaj. At that time Shukanand Swami commented, "I myself edited this particular Vachanāmrut and was instrumental in its selection, but only today have I grasped its true meaning."

5. In the propagation of the supreme form of Bhagwan Swaminarayan, Gunatitanand Swami was never deterred by scriptural dogmatism. About those who indulged in such fanaticism, he remarked, "The *jiva* does not hesitate anywhere, but hesitates in describing Maharaj as Purushottam." Leading *paramhansas* had also seen and heard about the pastimes of Shriji Maharaj. Yet they were hesitant in writing about his true glory. In connection to this, Swami said, "People have been confused by the words of the shastras, so when we continuously bombard like this, it will clear up the confusion." So saying, he placed three *champā* flowers on Acharya Raghuvirji Maharaj's cushion and added, "Some have reached upto this first flower, others have reached upto this second flower, but no one has reached upto this last flower" (Swāmini Vāto 3.19).

In another words, some understood Shriji Maharaj as similar to Ramchandraji. They had reached the first flower. Others who recognized Maharaj as Shri Krishna had reached the second flower. But no one realized Shriji Maharaj as he was – supreme, the ultimate *avatāri* of all avatars, Purushottam – to reach the third flower. To inculcate this understanding to the *jivas*, Gunatitanand Swami handed over the third flower to Achintyanand Brahmachari and instructed him to compose a unique text describing Shriji Maharaj's sublime form and reflecting his divine glory in every word, so that the supremacy of Shriji Maharaj could be propagated in Satsang.

Abiding by Gunatitanand Swami's directive, Achintyanand Brahmachari composed a monumental volume in Sanskrit known as Harililākalpataru, which described the supreme glory of Maharaj.

Thus, Gunatitanand Swami not only spread the knowledge of Shriji Maharaj's supremacy through his talks, but also had it noted in the religious literature of the Sampradaya through his disciples.

There are many such incidents prevalent in the Sampradaya which have been propagated by prominent *sadgurus*. We have also come to know about them through the hierarchy of spiritual gurus. The constraints of space do not allow further narration of such incidents. A clearer understanding will be gained by studying the literature of the Sampradaya.

4.7 Questions Regarding Supremacy

Let us now discuss certain questions regarding the knowledge of Shriji Maharaj's supremacy.

Question 1: If Bhagwan Swaminarayan is supreme, why has he been described as Krishna in the Vachanāmrut, in other shastras of the Sampradaya and in the kirtans of the *paramhansas*?

Answer: During the time of Shriji Maharaj, there were many faiths and cults, some of which expounded irreligious practices, accepted false gurus, believed in superstitions and indulged in black magic. Their influence was widespread. All of these fiercely opposed the new Sampradaya. In such trying times, if any person tried to identify himself as God, people would naturally be reluctant to join the Sampradaya out of sheer dismay. The acceptance of a new idea is always gradual. Shriji Maharaj was

therefore identified initially as a Satpurush, then as an avatar and finally as Purushottam – the *avatāri* of all avatars. As the aspirants' faith in him deepened, the *paramhansas* depicted Shriji Maharaj in more inspiring and enlightening terms.

In the initial stages, Muktanand Swami recognized Shriji Maharaj as Sadguru. In the *ārti* composed at Kalvani, he wrote, "*Jai Sadguru Swami*"; in the next stage in which he recognized Shriji Maharaj as Krishna he wrote, "*Chhāndi ke Shri Krishna dev"* and finally, recognizing Shriji Maharaj as Purushottam, he wrote, *"Māiri me to Purushottam var pāyo"* and "*Piyā pāyā to fir kyā sonā*". This illustrates his gradual realization of Shriji Maharaj's supremacy.

To attract people, Shriji Maharaj consecrated the *murtis* of those deities at the places where they were popularly worshipped. Their devotees came for darshan. By subsequent association with the sadhus, they developed unshakeable faith in Shriji Maharaj's supreme and sublime form. Gradually, the true *upāsanā* began to be widely accepted in the Sampradaya.

Eminent *sadgurus* explain with a simple illustration: '*Sthulārundhateenyāya*', i.e., when a child is shown the crescent moon, the moon is pointed out to be 'on that roof'. The roof is merely mentioned to locate the moon. This does not mean that the moon is actually on the roof. In reality, the moon is far away. Similarly, to explain the glory of Purushottam, he was initially identified as a Satpurush, then as an avatar, and finally as *avatāri*.

In certain Vachanāmruts, Shriji Maharaj is identified as Shri Krishna. At various places, Shriji Maharaj has called himself a preceptor, a guru, an *āchārya*, a sadhu, or a *sādhak*. However, to the genuine aspirant, the God whom he is worshipping is supreme and above all. To him, lesser descriptions are meant for others. He only pays heed to the words which refer to his master's supremacy. Shriji Maharaj has given the same directive in the Shikshāpatri:

Eteshu yāni vākyāni Shri Krishnasya vrishasya cha,
Atyutkarshaparāni syus-tathā bhakti viragayoho.
Mantavyāni pradhānāni tānyevetara vākyataha,
Dharmena sahitā Krishna bhaktihi kāryeti tadrahaha.

The quotations from these shastras which describe the transcendent glory of God and which give a superlatively elegant exposition of dharma, bhakti and *vairāgya* should be regarded as fundamental truths, compared with various other quotations. The quintessence of these chosen shastras is devotion to God with observance of dharma.

- Shikshāpatri 101-2

Scriptural words which do not clearly define the supreme form of God, or which inadequately describe his majestic glory should not be accepted for understanding the genuine *upāsanā*. As ordained by Shriji Maharaj, only those words which express his supreme divine glory should be accepted.

Question 2: Many sadhus and avatars have spoken of themselves as Purushottam in the shastras, for example, Kapil Bhagwan has said, "Because of fear for me the wind

blows, the sun shines, the God of rain – Indra – showers rain, the God of fire – Agni – burns and the God of death all do their duties unhesitatingly."[9]

Shri Krishna also says in the Bhagavad Gitā, "Because I am transcendental, beyond both *kshar* and Akshar, and because I am the greatest, I am described in this world and in the Vedas as Purushottam."[10]

"Only those who have surrendered unto me can easily cross beyond *māyā*."[11]

"I am the fire of digestion in the bodies of all living entities."[12]

"O Arjun! There is no truth superior to me."[13]

Considering the words of these *bhaktas* or avatars describing themselves as Purushottam, who in reality is Purushottam?

Answer: Purushottam is none other than Bhagwan Swaminarayan. According to his desire, the other avatars descended on earth to liberate the *jivas*. At that time, it was essential that people give up the irreligious ways and seek refuge in them. To achieve this, Shriji Maharaj entered them *(anupravesh)* and uttered the above words. But only Purushottam – Shriji Maharaj – can grant ultimate liberation. Without his entry or *anupravesh*, even Virāt was helpless to do anything. No wonder then that others are incapable. Therefore, the above words should be treated as Bhagwan Swaminarayan's. With his entry, the powers of the particular entity are suppressed and his own powers prevail. That, however, does not make those avatars Purna Purushottam. When Purushottam withdraws his powers, those avatars are reduced to their original state.

"Moreover, when that Purushottam Nārāyan takes the form of Purush for some task, that Purush is eclipsed by the divine light of Purushottam, and only Purushottam remains. In the same way, when Purushottam takes the form of *māyā*, *māyā* is also eclipsed by the divine light of Purushottam, and only God remains in that form. Then God takes the form of *mahattattva*, then the forms of others evolved from *mahattattva*… In this manner, in whomever that Purushottam Bhagwan 'enters' for the purpose of fulfilling many types of tasks, he eclipses that entity by his own divine light and he himself reigns supreme through that entity… Then, after completing the task for which he had 'entered' that entity, he separates from it. Thereafter, the other entity remains as he was before. Thus, the additional powers that that entity appeared to have should be known to actually be Purushottam Bhagwan's powers" (Vachanāmrut, Panchālā 7).

Avalba's incident is well-known in the Sampradaya. When she was engrossed in Shriji Maharaj, she felt the presence of Maharaj within her. In this superhuman state, she said that she herself was Shriji Maharaj. When Shriji Maharaj left her, she asked, "Why are all of you sitting around me?" Similarly when the Gopis, out of intense love, were lost in Shri Krishna, they used to say, "I have lifted the Govardhan Mountain, I have killed Aghāsur, etc." That, however, did not imply that they were transformed into Shri Krishna. Likewise, the examples of Vāmdev and Prahlād in the shastras are also well-known.

Explaining this point in a simple manner, Gunatitanand Swami recited the *shloka*, "*Madbhayādvāti*..." and said, "He [Kapil Bhagwan] showed much power, but managed to liberate only his mother. Thus, this *shloka* seems to be describing somebody else's spiritual power, but not his own" (Swāmini Vāto 3.72).

Therefore one should understand that words indicative of supreme powers are in reality the words of Purushottam himself.

Question 3: How many avatars are there? Are they all identical? Or is there a difference between them?

Answer: The shastras mention 24 avatars. At other places, ten avatars are mentioned. But as described in the Shrimad Bhāgavat, just as thousands of springs flow from an inexhaustible lake, similarly from Shri Hari – the reservoir of *sattvagun* – countless avatars emerge.[14]

The Bhagavad Gitā also proclaims:

Bahuni ne vyatitāni janmāni tava chārjuna,

Oh Arjun! Many, many births both you and I have taken. I am aware of them, but you are not.

- Bhagavad Gitā 4.5

Nishkulanand Swami says, "Sahajanand Swami is the cause of all these avatars. There are countless avatars. And Purushottam Nārāyan Shri Sahajanand Swami is the *avatāri* of all avatars and the cause of all causes."[15]

Hearing the prayers of the Vedas, Purushottam Nārāyan – with utmost compassion for the *jivas* – descended to grant them final liberation.

Shriji Maharaj himself has written, "The Vedas prayed to me, asking me to destroy *avidyā* – ignorance. Today, I am fulfilling that promise."

Again Vairāt Nārāyan continually prayed for fifty years and four and a half hours of his time. Only then did Shriji Maharaj come down to this cosmos for the first time. All the followers in the Sampradaya are well aware of this fact.

Evo karyo moto upkār, jemā anek janano uddhār.

His highest obligation has led to the liberation of many jivas.

- Bhaktachintāmani 83.45

This time Purushottam Nārāyan himself had descended, because – despite previous avatars – the primordial ignorance of the *jivas* still remained to be removed. *"Tatsrishtvā tadanuprāvishat"* means that only when Vāsudev Nārāyan – in the form of Purush – resides in Vairāt Purush, is Vairāt Purush recognized as an incarnation. That is to say, only after the entry of Vāsudev, all the way from Purush up to Brahmā, are the forms acknowledged as incarnations of God.

Acharya Shri Bhagvatprasadji Maharaj, in the Sanskrit commentary, *Bhaktamanoranjani,* on Shrimad Bhāgavat writes, *"Avatārān kramishyan prathamam purushāvatāramāha"* (3.3.1). In the sequential order of avatars, the foremost is the avatar of Purush. Purush is the source of creation and dissolution of numerous minor avatars, and is simultaneously their prime cause. This is how the 24 avatars came about. Subsequently, there were scores of avatars of Shri Hari. But all of them were partial, incomplete and served a limited purpose. Since all of them, to a certain extent, possessed the dignity and powers of Purushottam Nārāyan, they are likely to be treated as equal to one another. But Purushottam Nārāyan's manifestation in all of them was not in the same measure. There were variations; hence the distinctions between various avatars. Furthermore, there is the distinction of abodes also, as each of the avatars

have their own abodes. Explaining this difference, Shriji Maharaj has said, "The many avatars are all ultimately of God; yet, among these avatars, I like Rushabhdevji greatly. I also like Kapilji and Dattatreya equally, but to a lesser extent than Rushabhdevji. … On the other hand, I do not have such a great liking for the other avatars of God such as Matsya, Kachchha, etc" (Vachanāmrut, Loyā 14).

It is thus quite clear that Shriji Maharaj is supreme, the ultimate *avatāri* of all avatars, and the ultimate cause of all causes. Higher than all the deities, *ishwars*, avatars, *akshar muktas* and Mul Akshar, he is worthy to be worshipped by all. He is the all-doer. He is always with a form. And he governs all. None are beyond him. True *upāsanā* is attaining the state of *brahmarup* and offering devotion to him.

4.8 Above All but Respect for All

Shriji Maharaj has held all deities, *āchāryas* and avatars in high regard. The comparison with them is purely for the purposes of clearly understanding the basic principle that the various avatars, their deeds and their followers are in no way superior to Shriji Maharaj, his deeds and his followers. In the mandirs he constructed, Shriji Maharaj consecrated the *murtis* of various deities, thereby showing his high regard for them all. But to have innate faith to one's *ishtadev,* akin to the loyalty of a faithful wife for her husband, is the hallmark of a genuine devotee. Shriji Maharaj has laid great stress on this point.

He says, "A wife who observes the vow of fidelity… …the affection she has for all other men does not even come close to the affection she has for her husband. Nor does she see virtues in other men as she sees in her own husband. Moreover, she acts according to the wishes of her own husband. Such is the firm fidelity that a faithful wife has towards her husband. …In the same manner, a devotee should have firm fidelity to God. Nor does he develop affection for other avatars of his *Ishtadev*. He keeps affection only for the form that he has attained, and he acts according to His wishes only" (Vachanāmrut, Gadhadā III 16).

Shriji Maharaj was interested in the well-being of all *jivas* and therefore he has been described as '*Sarvajiva-hitāvaha*'. He has taught in the Shikshāpatri:

Tasyaiv sarvathā bhaktihi kartavyā manujairbhuvi,

All human beings on this earth should worship that supreme God only.

- Shikshāpatri 113

The genuine aspirant should be elated by this supreme attainment. Nevertheless, this should not act as an excuse to deride other deities, goddesses or avatars. Shriji Maharaj has strictly forbidden this. He is not pleased with those persons who show such disrespect. He does not approve of the tendency of manifesting petty ego.

Brahmaswarup Shastriji Maharaj has followed the same tradition. In the Akshar Purushottam mandirs he constructed, he consecrated the *murtis* of avatars. In assemblies, he often recited Shrimad Bhāgavat. He often encouraged weekly discourses on it to derive inspiration from the lives of devotees such as Shuk, Sanak, Narad, Dhruva, Prahlād and the Gopis. He insisted that all followers of the Sampradaya should develop a broad outlook and not be narrow-minded.

The sadhus and *paramhansas* of Shriji Maharaj, as well as Aksharbrahman Gunatitanand Swami, Brahmaswarup Pragji Bhakta (Bhagatji Maharaj), Brahmaswarup Shastriji Maharaj and Brahmaswarup Yogiji Maharaj worked tirelessly throughout their lives so that thousands of *jivas* could realize Shriji Maharaj in his true form and worship him. At present, Pragat Brahmaswarup Param Pujya Swamishri Narayanswarupdasji – Pramukh Swami Maharaj – constantly travels all over the world to spread the message of Bhagwan Swaminarayan. The truly learned are never egoistic and do not assert 'only mine is the best'. They are open-minded enough to accept 'whatever is good'.

Today, irreligion and atheism are present. In such critical times, the faith described here has gone a long way in consolidating morality and spiritual faith in countless people. The Swaminarayan Akshar-Purushottam Sanstha is earning a reputation all over the world as an active socio-spiritual movement. Many intellectuals, aspirants and youths in particular become members. Here, they find solutions to their problems.

All are eager to become *brahmarup*. This can only be attained through the medium of Aksharbrahman, who descended along with Bhagwan Swaminarayan and then remained forever present – *pragat* – in the form of a God-realized Sadhu. Bhagwan Swaminarayan, the exponent of the genuine and supreme *upāsanā*, is at present with us through a God-realized Sadhu. In the person of Pramukh Swami Maharaj.

6. *Svakiyāvatārāsdiyāshcha bhaktā nijopāsanāgnānamābodhya teshām*,

Tathaitānsvadhāmādhinetum vichintyāgataha Shriharirheturuktashchaturatha.

7. Akshar looks at the countless *muktas*, from whom one Purush arises. This is explained in Swāmini Vāto 7.15. The shastras describe this Purush as Mul Purush.

8. *Sandarshayet purvanijāvatārāllinān svamurtau shatasho manushyān*

Lino na teshu svayam adbhutantat trayodesham Dharmasutasya lakshma

9. *Madbhayādvāti vāto'yam suryastapati madbhayāt*,
Varshatindro dahatyagnir mrutyushcharati madbhayāt.
10. *Yasmāt ksharamatito'hamaksharādapi chottamaha*,
Ato'smi loke Vede cha prathitaha Purushottamaha.
11. *Māmeva ye prapadhyante māyāmetām taranti te*. (Bhagavad Gitā 7.4)
12. *Aham vaishvānaro bhutvā...*(Bhagavad Gitā 15.14)
13. *Mattaha parataram nānyatkinchidasti Dhananjaya.*(Bhagavad Gitā 7.7)
14. *Avatārā hyasankhyeyāhā harehe sativanidherdvijāhā*,
Yathāvidāsinaha kulyāhā sarasaha syuhu sahasrashaha.
- Shrimad Bhāgavatam 1.3.26
15. Nishkulānand Kāvya, Avatār Chintāmani 32

5. PRAGAT:
God Is Ever-Present

5.1 Meaning of Pragat? How?

With infinite compassion, Parabrahman Purushottam Nārāyan Bhagwan Swaminarayan descended upon our earth. He opened the road to ultimate liberation – the way to Akshardham – for all through dedicated *pragat upāsanā*. Nishkulanand Swami therefore writes:

Bandh kidhā bijā bāranā re, vaheti kidhi Aksharvāt.
Purushottam pragati re...

With the manifestation of Purushottam, all other doors were closed, and the pathway to Akshardhām was laid wide open.

For attaining Akshardhām, Shriji Maharaj has propounded the principle of *pragat upāsanā*. What is the *pragat* form of Purushottam? How does he always remain *pragat*?

To those on earth, God in his divine abode is unmanifest or *paroksh*. When he descends on this earth, he is manifest or *pragat*. The manifestation was not, however, restricted to Shriji Maharaj's lifetime, nor to the liberation of the *jivas* living during that period. If it were, it would imply an imperfection in his system, since it shuts the door of *moksha* for future generations, and results in the collapse of the Sampradaya.

Shriji Maharaj has explained the principle of the shastras that God is eternally present on earth. And those who seek his refuge will be liberated. Acharya Shri Raghurvirji Maharaj has interpreted the word 'Sampradaya' in his commentary on the Shikshāpatri as:

Guruparamparā-prāptaha sadupadeshaha Sampradāyaha

A true Sampradaya is one in which, through a successive line of gurus, sermons (lucidly explaining the principles of Brahman and Parabrahman) are given (*Shikshāpatri Bhāshya* 207).

The *Halayudhkosh* explains: *Sampradāyo gurukramaha*,

Sampradaya is the spiritual succession of gurus.

God is never unmanifest; the Sampradaya established by him will always flourish and the path to liberation forever remain open. Shriji Maharaj says in the Vachanāmrut, "God himself has said, 'I forever reside in the eight types of *murtis* and in the *Sant*'" (Vachanāmrut, Gadhadā I 68).

According to this principle, Shriji Maharaj is always *pragat* through his *murti* as well as the Brahmaswarup Satpurush. All the pillars of Satsang – *murti*, the Sadhu and shastras – are extremely beneficent. But the best among them for liberation is the Sadhu, according to the words of Maharaj.

The Shrimad Bhāgavat also places the Sadhu on a higher pedestal than *murtis* and holy places:

Na hyammayāni tirthāni na devā mrichchhilāmayāhā,

Te punantyurukālena darshanādeva sādhavaha.

The pilgrimage centres are not simply reservoirs of water. Nor are the *murtis* just clay or stone, i.e., they are also divine. But they elevate in the long run. Whereas, even by the mere darshan of the Sadhu, one is purified.

- Shrimad Bhāgavat 10.84.11

Aksharbrahman Gunatitanand Swami also confirms, " 'How can one enjoy the company of God when he is *paroksh*?' He answered, 'Through discourses, *kirtans*, spiritual talks, bhajans, and meditation, one can experience the company of God. But the association of a great Sadhu is akin to the company of manifest God. He gives the same degree of bliss because God always dwells fully in such a Sadhu. Failure to recognize God in all his divinity, in spite of his physical proximity, means one is not truly near him. Then how is the manifestation going to help him without this knowledge? God is *pragat* even today if one realizes that with all his glory, God always dwells in the Sadhu. But without this knowledge he is as good as *paroksh* – despite being *pratyaksh*.' Thereupon a sadhu asked, 'Is God not manifest (*pratyaksh*) in the *murtis*?' Then Swami clarified, 'If one attributes human traits (*manushyabhāv*) to the actions of God and his holy Sadhu, then one regresses on the spiritual path like the waning of the moon; and if one attributes divine traits (*divyabhāv*), then one progresses spiritually like the waxing moon of the second day of the bright half of the lunar month. And what actions do the *murtis* perform that one perceives faults in them and regresses? Therefore, only the talking-walking form of God [i.e., human form] can be called *pratyaksh* – manifest. And it is only the great Sadhu who can instill divinity in the *murti*. But the three – *murtis*, shastras and pilgrim places – together still do not equal a Sadhu. Such a great Sadhu, however, is able to make all three – *murtis*, shastras and pilgrim places. Therefore, such a Sadhu, in whom God fully resides, is the manifest *pratyaksh* form of God' " (Swāmini Vāto 5.395).

Shriji Maharaj also stresses the same point, "When God is not manifest on this earth, one should seek the refuge of the *Sant* who has the realization of God – because the *jiva* can also attain liberation through him" (Vachanāmrut, Vartāl 10).

These words of Maharaj have been exactly reiterated by Nishkulanand Swami in the following lines:

Kahyu bahu prakāre kalyān re, ati aganit apramān re;
Pan sahuthi saras Santmā re, rākhyu Vālame eni vātmā re.

Many are the means of liberation – innumerable and immeasurable.
But as told by the beloved Master, the best among these is the *Sant*.

- Nishkulānand Kāvya, Purushottam Prakāsh 42

Shriji Maharaj is therefore fully and forever *pragat* through the Sadhu. One of the six objectives of Maharaj's incarnation on earth was to remain ever present on this earth through his Param Ekāntik Sadhu.

In this way, God himself is present on earth, he is said to be *pragat* Bhagwan – manifest God. When he physically leaves, but travels on this earth through the Sadhu,

that Sadhu is recognized as the *pragat swarup* – form of God.

In Purushottam Prakāsh, composed by Nishkulanand Swami, Shriji Maharaj says:

Sant hu ne hu te vali Sant re, em shrimukhe kahe Bhagwānt re;
Sant mānajo māri murati re, emā fer nathi ek rati re.

The Sant is myself and I am the Sant. Thus God says himself.

The Sant is my very form – there is not the slightest difference.

- Nishkulānand Kāvya, Purushottam Prakāsh 41

5.2 True Knowledge Is Recognizing the Pragat Form of God

It is laid down in the Shrutis:

Rute jnānānna muktihi ,

There is no liberation without knowledge.

Again:

Tameva viditvātimrityumeti nānyaha panthā vidyate'yanāya.

Only after knowing [the form of] God is the *jiva* delivered from the cycles of birth and death. There is no other road to liberation.

What is the definition of the knowledge that leads to instant liberation? Who is to be understood as a *jnāni*? This knowledge is not merely the literal interpretration of the shastras, but that which is experienced. Shriji Maharaj has said, "Those who know God through the shastras receive liberation after several lives" (Vachanāmrut, Loyā 7).

Defining knowledge, Shriji Maharaj says, "God dwells within them all as their *antaryāmi* and as their cause. It is that very God who is this manifest form. To know and see God with such an understanding of greatness is called perfect *jnān*" (Vachanāmrut, Loyā 7).

"Knowing God perfectly means knowing the manifest form of God through the *indriyas*, the *antahkaran*, and experience. Only then can one be said to possess perfect *jnān*. However, if any one of these three types of *jnān* is lacking, one cannot be said to have realized ultimate *jnān*, nor can one overcome the cycles of birth and death. In fact, even though someone may have attained the *brahmaswarup* state through his personal endeavours, if he does not realize the manifest form of God in this manner, he cannot be said to possess perfect *jnān*" (Vachanāmrut, Loyā 7).

"Those who realize this esoteric truth understand the human form of God on this earth as being exactly the same as the form of God residing in Akshardhām – they do not feel that there is even a slight difference between that form and this form. One who has known God in this way can be said to have known God perfectly. For him, *māyā* can be said to have been eradicated. One who realizes this is called a devotee with *jnān* and an *ekāntik bhakta*" (Vachanāmrut, Panchālā 7).

"Such a devotee with *jnān* faithfully serves the manifest form of God – who eternally has a form – realizing him as transcending Prakruti-Purush and Akshar, and as being the cause and supporter of all. Such understanding constitutes *jnān*, and such *jnān* leads to ultimate liberation" (Vachanāmrut, Loyā 7).

Gunatitanand Swami says "The ultimate *jnān* is to recognize this Sadhu" (Swāmini Vāto 5.7).

Nishkulanand Swami also supports this:

Ej jnāni ej tattvavettā, jene pragat Prabhune pekhiyā;
E vinā rakhe jnāni gano, jene Hari nayane nathi dekhiyā.

He who has closely observed the *pragat* form of God is the *jnāni* and the philosopher.

He who has not seen him with his own eyes should never be considered a *jnāni*.

- Nishkulānand Kāvya, Sārsiddhi 30

5.3 The Importance of Devotion to the Pragat Form of God

God, himself or manifest in the form of the Sadhu, is always present on this earth. As observed earlier, *jnān* means to know that *pragat* form of God. And only he who knows the *pragat* (manifest) form of God is a true devotee; and then to seek shelter in him is genuine devotion. Shriji Maharaj confirms this as follows:

"Whenever a *jiva* attains a human body in Bharat-khand, God's avatars or God's sadhus will certainly also be present on earth at that time. If that *jiva* can recognize them, then he becomes a devotee of God" (Vachanāmrut, Vartāl 19).

"To realize such redemptive virtues in *pratyaksh* God and to seek his firm refuge is known as bhakti" (Vachanāmrut, Gadhadā II 10).

Praising bhakti of the manifest, Muktanand Swami says:

Kalpataru sarvanā sankalp satya kare,
pāse jai pritashu seve jyāre;
Tem je pragat Purushottam prichhashe,
thāshe harijan tatkāl tyāre...
Pragatne bhaji bhaji pār pāmyā ghanā,
gidh ganikā kapivrund koti;
Vrajtani nār vyabhichār bhāve tari,
pragat upāsanā sauthi moti...

When approached with loving care, the *kalpataru* (the wish-fulfilling tree) fulfils all desires.

Similarly, he who recognizes *pragat* Purushottam is transformed into a devotee of God.

By dedicated service to God in human form, many were liberated – the vulture, the fallen women and hordes of monkeys.

In spite of their amorous sentiments, the women of Vraj by their sincere *pragat upāsanā* were liberated.

Also:

Pragatnā bhajanthi param sukh pāmie,
Ura thaki nāsh pāme andhāru...

Only devotion to the *pragat* form of God yields ultimate bliss and dispels inner darkness.

Only the most fortunate are privileged to offer *pragat* bhakti. Devotion, save that of

the manifest God, is an indication of ego and dogmatism, as pointed out by Nishkulanand Swami:

Mote bhāgye bhete bhagati, pragat Prabhu paramānani;
Teh vināni je bhagati, te to mat mamatnā tānani.

Only by extreme good fortune can one serve the *pragat* form of God.
Devotion without this is a display of ego and obstinacy.

- Nishkulānand Kāvya, Sārsiddhi 22

In his book *Bhaktinidhi,* Nishkulanand Swami has acknowledged *pragat* bhakti as the highest. When Shiva heard that the villagers of Vraj were blessed with the darshan as well as the touch of Shri Krishna, he was remorseful and felt that had he been born as a cowherd, he would have enjoyed similar bliss. Brahmā also became a fish to enjoy the happiness of the *pragat* form of God. Nishkulanand Swami writes:

Em pragat bhakti sahu upare, ethi uparānt nathi kāi;
Nishkulānand nishche vāratā, saune samajavi manamāi.

Devotion of the *pragat* is the supreme. Nothing supersedes it.
Nishkulanand says everyone is convinced of this as an unquestionable fact.

- Nishkulānand Kāvya, Bhaktinidhi 15

Brahmanand Swami has also written:

Pragat swarup upāsi, dhanya so pragat swarup upāsi.

Blessed are the devotees who offer *upāsanā* to the *pragat* form of God.

Gunatitanand Swami says, "God is *pragat* and these talks are *pragat.* The rest are like the sun painted on a piece of paper" (Swāmini Vāto 5.64).

Explaining the importance of faith in the *pratyaksh* form of God, Shriji Maharaj says, "If a person has firm faith in the manifest form of God and believes himself to be fulfilled merely by his darshan, and desires nothing else, then God himself forcefully shows him his divine powers and forms in his abodes" (Vachanāmrut, Gadhadā I 9).

"Except for the manifest form of Shri Krishna Bhagwan, he wishes for no other object. Then, even if he has only a slight amount of *ātmā*-realization and *vairāgya*, such a devotee still attains profound bliss in the abode of God after leaving his body" (Vachanāmrut, Gadhadā III 5).

Imperfections are eradicated only by the contact of the *pragat* form of God. Gunatitanand Swami explains, "Indra killed Vishwarup, thereby committing a fourfold crime... Narad then met him and told him, 'Your brother Vāmanji is an incarnation of God; therefore take refuge in him.' Indra developed unshakeable faith in Vāmanji and was relieved from the sin of *brahmahatyā*. Only by taking refuge in the *pragat* are all ends accomplished" (Swāmini Vāto 1.293).

5.4 Pragat Bhakti*:* The Pathway to Peace

Inner peace and happiness are attained by *pragat* bhakti. Once Sadguru Muktanand Swami asked Shriji Maharaj the means to peace. Shriji Maharaj narrated various incidents of his own life beginning with his birth. Muktanand Swami felt that Maharaj

had missed the point. The following day, he repeated the same question. Maharaj again started to repeat the same account of his life. Muktanand Swami, however, failed to grasp the essence of Maharaj's words. Finally Shriji Maharaj said, "Swami, please go to the villages; you will experience peace." So, Muktanand Swami left Gadhada. Nityanand Swami followed him and explained, "Shriji Maharaj is God himself. Nowhere else will you find the peace which comes from reminiscing the divine episodes of the *pragat* form of God. Maharaj wanted you to realize this. That is why he had narrated various incidents of his life to you." Muktanand Swami soon realized his mistake.

The ancient sage Vyasji had composed many shastras, yet he was still at unrest with himself. Then, as advised by Narad, he recited the episodes of Shri Krishna's life in the Shrimad Bhāgavat. Only then did his unrest subside and he experienced true happiness.

Precisely for this reason, Shriji Maharaj asked Muktanand Swami, "You too should continuously preach and write shastras related to your Sampradaya and your *Ishtadev* for the rest of your life. This is my only command to you for as long as you live" (Vachanāmrut, Gadhadā II 58).

Obeying this order, Muktanand Swami religiously engaged himself in preparing the literature of the Sampradaya until the end of his life. He clearly wrote:

Pragatnā bhajanthi param sukh pāmie,
Ura thaki nāsh pāme andhāru...Bhajan kar bhāvshu.

Only devotion to the *pragat* form of God yields ultimate bliss and dispels inner darkness.

Similarly, Swarupanand Swami remained preoccupied with the inner vision of Shriji Maharaj, oblivious of his manifest form. To explain to him the importance of the *pragat* form, by Shriji Maharaj's will he fell ill. During this illness, Swarupanand Swami failed to have the inner vision of Shriji Maharaj and was quite at a loss. Feeling utterly despondent, he went to Shriji Maharaj and prayed. Shriji Maharaj told him, "Go to Parvatbhai and you will find peace."

Parvatbhai, in the course of their talks, requested him to meditate on the roof tiles of Dada Khachar's house. Swarupanand Swami soon realized his mistake and understood that by the association of Shriji Maharaj, even the roof tiles had attained *nirgunbhāv* and were worthy of meditation. Therefore Swarupanand Swami realized that he should also be constantly engaged with the *pragat* form of Shriji Maharaj. He changed his course and attained the desired peace.

5.5 Liberation Through the Pragat Form of God or His Sadhu

Many seekers worship the *paroksh* form of God for their liberation. But by a synthesis of all the shastras, we can clearly understand that without the *pragat* form of God, or a God-realized Sadhu, ultimate liberation is unattainable.

Explaining the fundamentals of liberation, Shriji Maharaj says, "If a person realizes the greatness of manifest (*pratyaksh*) God and his *Bhakta-Sant* in exactly the same way as he realizes the greatness of past (*paroksh*) avatars of God such as Rama, Krishna,

etc., as well as the greatness of past sadhus such as Narad, the Sanakādik, Shukji, Jadbharat, Hanuman, Uddhava, etc. – then nothing remains to be understood on the path of liberation. Whether this principle is understood after being told once, or after being told a thousand times; whether it is understood today, or after a thousand years, there is no option but to understand it. …A person who has such a firm conviction has grasped all the fundamental principles. What is more, he will never fall from the path of liberation. …Thus, the essence of all the shastras is this very fact" (Vachanāmrut, Gadhadā II 21).

"That is why the Shrutis state: 'If a person develops conviction in the guru – who is the manifest (*pratyaksh*) form of God – in the same way that he has conviction in the non-manifest (*paroksh*) deities, then, as a result, he attains all of the *arthas* which are described as attainable.' In fact, when he attains the company of such a *Sant*, he has, while still alive, attained he who was to be attained after death. That is to say, he has attained that which is called the highest state of enlightenment, or liberation, while being alive" (Vachanāmrut, Gadhadā III 2).

"The sole cause behind the *jiva* attaining liberation, transcending *māyā* and becoming *brahmaswarup* is its engagement in the *jnān*, meditation, devotional songs, spiritual discourses, etc., of the manifest form of Vāsudev Bhagwan, who is Purushottam. It is due to these that the *jiva* transcends *māyā*, attains an extremely elevated state, and also attains God's Akshardhām" (Vachanāmrut, Gadhadā II 32).

"Thus, one who aspires for liberation should recognize God through these characteristics and seek refuge of that God. One should have complete faith in him. One should perform his bhakti while remaining within the framework of his injunctions. This is the only means of attaining liberation. …However, when God is not manifest on this earth, one should seek the refuge of the *Sant* who has the realization of God – because the *jiva* can also attain liberation through him" (Vachanāmrut, Vartāl 10).

"Thus, the means to transcend *māyā* is as follows: When the *jiva* comes into contact with the manifest form of Shri Purushottam Bhagwan – who is beyond *māyā* and who is the destroyer of *māyā* and all karmas – or the *Sant* who has attained that God, then by accepting their refuge, the *jiva* can transcend *māyā*" (Vachanāmrut, Jetalpur 1).

Time and again, at numerous places in the Vachanāmrut, Shriji Maharaj has declared God in *pragat* form or the God-realized Sadhu who has constant rapport with him as the means to final liberation. As a summing up of all the shastras, he explains, "In the four Vedas, the Purāns and the Itihās shastras, there is but one central principle, and that is that only God and his *Sant* can grant liberation. ...So, when one attains God or his *Sant*, then, apart from this, there is no other liberation for the *jiva*; this itself is ultimate liberation" (Vachanāmrut, Gadhadā II 59).

Gunatitanand Swami, well-versed in the shastras and fully aware of Shriji Maharaj's innermost opinion, has explained in his talks that only the *pragat* form of God or a God-realized Sadhu can grant *moksha*.

"Only God and his holy Sadhu can grant *moksha*" (Swāmini Vāto 1.20).

"One may observe ten million commands, but without resorting to manifest God

one will not attain *moksha.* And by observing even just one command by the order of this manifest God and manifest Sadhu, *moksha* is attained" (Swāmini Vāto 4.36).

"Only when ultimate *moksha* is attained can it be described as (true) *moksha*. … Such *moksha* is only attained by surrendering to the manifest form of God and God's enlightened Sadhu" (Swāmini Vāto 5.5).

Sadguru Nishkulanand Swami writes:

Bijā kahe muvā pachhi moksha re,
vali Prabhu batāve chhe proksh re…
Jyāre emaj arth jo sare re, tyāre Hari tan shid dhare re;
Jnān vinā to moksha na thāy re, em Shruti Smruti sahu gāya re;
Māte pragat joie Bhagwānt re, evu sarva granthnu siddhānt re;
Jem pragat ravi hoy jyāre re, jāy tam brahmāndnu tyāre re.
Jem pragat jalne pāmi re, jāy pyāsini pyās te vāmi re;
Jem pragat annane jame re, antar jatharājhāl virame re.
Tem pragat male Bhagwān re, tyāre jananu kalyān nidān re;
Māte pragat charitra sāmbhalvu re, hoy pragat tyā āvi malvu re.
Māte pragat Prabhu jo na hoy re, na thāy e nishpāp koy re;
Jāno pragat murti bhavpāj re, saheje utāravāno samāj re.

Others say liberation comes after death, and say that God is *paroksh* (not manifest).
If that be so, why should God assume a human form?
The Shrutis and Smrutis proclaim, 'There is no liberation without knowledge.'
Therefore the quintessence of all the shastras is that *pragat* God is necessary.
Because, when the sun shines, darkness vanishes.
Thirst is quenched only by drinking water.
Devouring hunger is satiated only by taking food.
Similarly, when God is *pragat*, liberation is assured.
Therefore, listen to the episodes of his life and work;
And go to him when he manifests in *pragat* form.
Without his manifestation, the sinners will remain unliberated.
Know the *pragat murti* to be a bridge which takes one
Easily across the ocean of births and deaths.

- Bhaktachintāmani 164

Pragat Prabhu ke Prabhunā Sant re,
teh vinā na uddhare jant re.

No creature can be liberated without God in *pragat* form or his Sadhu.

- Nishkulānand Kāvya, Kalyān Nirnay 13.28

Ātyantik kalyān kārane jāvu pragat Prabhune pās;
Mokshadāyak eh murti ke mokshadātā enā dās.

For final liberation, seek refuge in the *pragat* form of God.
He is the liberator, or his servant [the Sadhu].

- Nishkulānand Kāvya, Kalyān Nirnay 16.4

Māte kalyānkāri sāmbhalyā re, ek Hari ke Hari nā malyā re;
Sāchi vāt tu mānaje sahi re, eh beu vinā moksh nahi re.

Only God or the God-realized Sadhu are the liberators.

Accept this absolute truth. Because there is no liberation without them.

- Nishkulānand Kāvya, Kalyān Nirnay 16.10

Male Prabhu pragat pramān re, kā to tenā malele kalyān re;
Teh vinā to koti upāy re, ātyantik kalyān na thāy re.

Liberation is attained by the company of God in *pragat* form or the God-realized Sadhu.

Barring that, endless efforts do not lead to final liberation.

- Nishkulānand Kāvya, Kalyān Nirnay 2.18

Sadguru Brahmanand Swami has written:

Ā bhavsāgar pār utār, Hari ke Hari ko dās.

Moksha can only be attained through God or his servant [the God-realized Sadhu].

In Shri Vāsudev Māhātmya of the Skanda Purāna, in the chapter of the commentary on bhakti and *vairāgya,* the following verse reiterates the same point:

Sākshād-bhagwataha sangāt tad-bhaktānām cha vedrishām,
Dharmo hyekāntikaha pumbhihi prāpyate nānyathā kvachit.

By contact with God, or by contact with an *Ekāntik Bhakta,* who is virtuous as described in the preceding verse, *ekāntik* dharma can be attained. No other alternative can help in its attainment.

- Vāsudev Māhātmya 25.65

This same principle has been confirmed by Shriji Maharaj, “Such *ekāntik* dharma can only be attained by following the commands of a *Purush* who is free of worldly desires and who has attained the state of God-realization; it cannot be attained merely by reading books. Even if a person were to attempt to restate those talks exactly, having merely heard them, he would not be able to do so properly. Therefore, one can attain *ekāntik* dharma only from someone who has already attained the state of *ekāntik* dharma” (Vachanāmrut, Gadhadā I 60).

5.6 Deficiencies Resulting from Not Realizing the Pragat Form of God

From time immemorial, the *jiva* has been plagued by countless flaws. These can be overcome by the genuine knowledge of the *pragat* form of God and by seeking refuge in him. The imperfections cannot be eradicated without knowing the *pragat* form of God and without his association.

Shriji Maharaj says, “If any deficiency remains in understanding God, then one’s flaw will never be eradicated” (Vachanāmrut, Gadhadā II 13).

“Thus, even after attaining this Satsang – which is rare for even Brahmā and others – affection for objects other than God still remains because the person has not

developed as firm a conviction for the manifest (*pragat*) form of God as he has for the non-manifest (*paroksh*) form of God" (Vachanāmrut, Gadhadā III 2).

"If a devotee of God whose faith is perfect and who is not disturbed by lust, anger, avarice, etc., desires anything other than the manifest form of Shri Krishna Bhagwan, then, even if he is a great renunciant and has firm *vairāgya* and intense *ātmā*-realization, he will attain a lower level of bliss" (Vachanāmrut, Gadhadā III 5).

Aksharbrahman Gunatitanand Swami states, "Those who do not understand Maharaj as he is and the Sadhu as he is, are eternally unfortunate like the Yadavs. They are like the famine of 1876 (1820 CE) which occurred despite the torrential rains, and like one who bathes in the Ganga but keeps his head dry. Since, without knowing the glory they stay in this Satsang. They remain ignorant like children. But they are not able to understand the true glory of God and his Sadhu" (Swāmini Vāto 3.35).

"No matter how learned a scholar of the shastras or an orator of traditions and history one may be, if he does not know this manifest God and manifest Sadhu, he is unproductive like the *khijdo* and in his company, one will not experience peace or happiness" (Swāmini Vāto 3.68).

"Today, God is manifest, the Sadhu is manifest and dharma is manifest. And those who do not understand this at this time will bitterly regret afterwards" (Swāmini Vāto 4.50).

Sadguru Muktanand Swami writes:

Parokshthi bhavatano pār āve nahi,
Veda Vedānt kahe satya vāni.

The paroksh form of God cannot liberate; the Vedas and Vedanta affirm this truth.

Mangal rup pragatne meli, parokshne bhaje je prāni re;
Tapa tirth kare dev derā, man na tale masāni re…

Those who leave aside the beneficial form of the *pragat* and worship the *paroksh* form;

Despite their *tapa* (austerities), *tirth* (pilgrimages to holy places), and devotion to the deities, they can never attain the stage of no-mind.

Koi kahe Hari ho gaye, koi kahe Hari hovan hār;
Mukta pragatki prichh bina, bhatakat sab sansār.

Some say God has been; some say he is still to come.

Not knowing the *pragat* form, they roam [aimlessly] in the cycles of birth and death.

The shastras narrate the episodes of the divine life of God. Their mere reading or listening are of little significance. Only the *pragat* form of God is the source of bliss.

Sadguru Nishkulanand Swami writes:

Vānchi kāgal koi kanthno, jem nār apār rāji thai;
Pan pragat sukh piyutanu, anu jetlu āvyu nai.

On reading her husband's letter, the wife was immensely delighted.

Yet it was not even an iota of the pleasure of his actual presence.

- Nishkulānand Kāvya, Bhaktinidhi 14

Unmindful of *pragat* bhakti, those who worship the *paroksh* form are really lost, as described in the following by Nishkulanand Swami:

Jem koi fulavādinā ful meli, ākash fulni āshā kare;
Pār vinā parishram pade, sār thoduj male sare.
Tem pragat Prabhune parahari, parokshmā kare pratita;
Te to piyushno taru parhari, kari chhāsh pivā chāhe chitta.

Instead of plucking flowers from the garden, one who hopes to pluck them from the sky endures endless efforts without any results.

Similarly, instead of devotion to the *pragat*, devotion to the *paroksh* is like forsaking nectar for buttermilk.

- Nishkulānand Kāvya, Sārsiddhi 47

Pragat bhaji rushi patni, paroksh bhajyā Rushirāy;
Rushi patnie Hari rāji karyā, rushi rahyā paritāp māy.
Prabhu pragatnā prasang vinā, rahi gai evā motāne khot;
Āj kālnā abhāgiyā, dash vinā diye chhe dot.
Pragat vinā chhe pāmpalā, bhakta kare chhe bhavamāy;
Kharā khāndtā kusakā, kan nahi nisare te māy.
Hari lādilā lādu jami gayā, kede padyā rahyā patarāvalā;
Jethi bhukh na jāy sukh na thāy,
van samaje chāte chhe saghalā.

The wives of the rishis worshipped the *pragat* form of God, whilst the rishis worshipped the *paroksh*.

The wives pleased God; the rishis were left repenting.

Without the contact of the *pragat* form of God, the eminent were losers.

The unfortunate ones roam around aimlessly.

Without *pragat* bhakti, all are cripples,

Since no grains come out by only pounding the chaff.

The beloved of God ate the *lādus*, leaving the leaf-plates aside.

Mindlessly licking them neither gives joy, nor satisfies one's hunger.

- Nishkulānand Kāvya, Sārsiddhi 24

Sadguru Brahmanand Swami also says:

Pragat pramān Haribina prāni, kyu jahā tahā bhatakantā hai;
Or upāy kiye te koi vidhi, āt na bhavako antā hai;
Pragat pramān Purān batāve, Gitā pragat kathantā hai;
Pragat pramān binā Brahmānand, sab hi jagat bharamantā hai;

All are wandering here and there without knowing the *pragat* form of God.

Try all other means, but there is no end to the worldly turmoil.

The Gitā and other shastras point out the *pragat* form as the ultimate authority.

Brahmanand says that leaving aside the *pragat*, all the world is under a spell.

5.7 The Pragat Form of God After Shriji Maharaj's Return to Akshardhām

On Jeth *sud* 10, Samvat 1886 (1 June 1830 CE), Shriji Maharaj left this world to return to his divine abode Akshardhām. Since that day, the devotees could no longer have the darshan of his manifest *pratyaksh* form. In that case, how can one take him to be *pragat*? And what is the arrangement for the liberation of the *jivas* after his return to the divine abode?

These questions have been answered by Shriji Maharaj himself. God is never *paroksh* to the devotees who are endowed with genuine knowledge. "When Shri Krishna Bhagwan left his body, Rukmini and the other wives of God took his body and burnt themselves along with him. At that time, the ignorant thought, 'Now he is dead.' On the other hand, those who possessed *jnān* thought, 'He has disappeared from here and has manifested elsewhere.' They understood God as being eternal" (Vachanāmrut, Panchālā 7).

Although Shriji Maharaj physically returned to his divine abode, he remains *pragat* in another form to liberate the *jivas* eternally. That is to say, he remains present through Aksharbrahman.

Shriji Maharaj says, "Purushottam Bhagwan enters and dwells in all of the above as their cause and *antaryāmi*. However, he does not manifest in Prakruti-Purush to the extent he manifests in Akshar; and he does not manifest in Pradhān-Purush to the extent that he manifests in Prakruti-Purush. … In a similar way, Purushottam Bhagwan manifests in various entities with various degrees of power according to the task to be accomplished through that entity. Purushottam Bhagwan also resides in Akshar, Prakruti-Purush and others as their *antaryāmi*. However, because of the difference in the capacities of those entities, there is a difference in their power" (Vachanāmrut, Gadhadā I 41).

In this manner, his powers and majesty are at their peak in Aksharbrahman*;* but they are not manifest in the same measure in other *muktas*. Shriji Maharaj is therefore *pragat* on this earth through Aksharbrahman.

For further confirmation of this principle, Shriji Maharaj has talked of becoming *brahmarup* and offering dedicated devotion to Parabrahman. To attain the highest category of *nirvikalp* knowledge, a devotee has to attain virtues like Akshar*,* and with this elevated spiritual offer worship to Purushottam Bhagwan. The inference is therefore very clear that to attain the state of *brahmarup* or to acquire the highest category of *nirvikalp* knowledge, it is imperative to have the association of Akshar. It is essential to know Aksharbrahman in order to be free from the clutches of *māyā*, to realize God in all his divine glory, and to develop unshakeable faith in him (Vachanāmruts, Panchālā 7 & Gadhadā II 42).

After all, no one knows the glory and powers of God as much as Aksharbrahman does. *Nirvikalp* knowledge is not acquired by contact with other *muktas*. If the highest category of *nirvikalp* knowledge can be achieved through other *muktas*, why should Shriji Maharaj manifest on the earth along with Aksharbrahman? The fact that Shriji Maharaj manifested with Aksharbrahman and identified his form to the followers is

proof that the highest category of *nirvikalp* knowledge is attainable only through Aksharbrahman. Shriji Maharaj desired that countless *jivas* should be liberated even after Gunatitanand Swami. For fulfilling this objective, Aksharbrahman should perpetually remain on earth so that Maharaj can work through him.

In the *Vedras*, Shriji Maharaj has said, "The Vedas sing the praises of that Brahman. The road to liberation is also shown by that Brahman" (*Vedras,* p.165).

In the Vachanāmrut published by Bochasanwasi Shri Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha, Yogiji Maharaj has written in his blessings, "The Vachanāmrut proclaims that the Sadhu opens the doors of liberation. Maharaj has identified that Sadhu as Mul Akshar Murti Gunatitanand Swami."

It can therefore be clearly stated that Shriji Maharaj manifests on this earth through Aksharbrahman. During his lifetime, Maharaj had on many occasions identified Gunatitanand Swami as that Aksharbrahman, as we shall read in the following chapter on Aksharbrahman. Shriji Maharaj, after returning to his abode, remained *pragat* through Aksharbrahman Gunatitanand Swami.

After Maharaj returned to his divine abode, his mortal remains were cremated in Lakshmi Vadi in Gadhada. Soon after, Gunatitanand Swami went to answer a call of nature. On the way, he saw some green grass and thought, "Water is the life of grass; that is why it is so green. Our life was Maharaj, but he has now passed away." With this thought, he fainted and fell down. Shriji Maharaj immediately appeared before him, helped him to get up, embraced him and said, "Swami, why are you so sad? Where have I gone? I dwell totally in you, totally in you, totally in you." Thus, he said this thrice. Manifesting through Aksharbrahman Gunatitanand Swami, Shriji Maharaj liberated many seekers and gave them a pride of place in Akshardhām.

After Aksharbrahman Gunatitanand Swami returned to Akshardhām, Shriji Maharaj remained *pragat* through the spiritual succession of God-realized gurus. Gunatitanand Swami has revealed, "All of you will pass away in five to ten years, but I will live forever" (Swāmini Vāto 5.67).

In the *gunātit* spiritual succession, Bhagwan Swaminarayan has remained *pragat* through successive gurus – Brahmaswarup Bhagatji Maharaj, Brahmaswarup Shastriji Maharaj and Brahmaswarup Yogiji Maharaj. At present, Shriji Maharaj is *pragat* through His Divine Holiness Pragat Brahmaswarup Pramukh Swami Maharaj.

5.8 Only One Pragat Form of Shriji Maharaj

Bhagwan Swaminarayan remains *pragat* through Aksharbrahman – the *gunātit* Satpurush. He continuously moves on this earth and opens the doors of liberation for countless *jivas*. There can be only one such Satpurush.

Shriji Maharaj manifests only through Aksharbrahman, and eternal Aksharbrahman is only one. God's manifestation is naturally therefore, through only one.

Shriji Maharaj has clearly described in Vachanāmrut the situation if more than one God were at work, "[If there was the] existence of several Bhagwans, the governance of the world would not remain orderly. One Bhagwan would say, 'I will create the world,' while another Bhagwan would say, 'I will destroy the world.' One Bhagwan would say,

‘I will make it rain,’ while another would say, ‘I will not.’ One would say, ‘I will instil human instincts in animals,’ while another would say, ‘I will instil animal instincts in humans.’ A stable state would not be possible in this situation. But see how orderly everything functions in the world! There is not even the slightest irregularity. Thus, the governor of all activities and the lord of all is one Bhagwan” (Vachanāmrut, Gadhadā III 39).

Similarly, if Bhagwan manifests through more than one Sadhu, chaos would prevail in the system of liberation.

A king may have more than one son, but only one of them – competent and virtuous – inherits the throne. All the sons cannot occupy it. Similarly, the throne of the *pragat* also can not be an inheritance for more than one.

A Sampradaya shines by a galaxy of virtuous sadhus and devotees. But there is only one sadhu who is the *pragat* form of God with all his redemptive traits.

Nishkulanand Swami has written:

Bijā gunavān to ghanā malashe,
pan nahi male Harinā malel;
Nishkulānand evā Sant sambandhe,
anantnā pāp balel.

You may find many virtuous persons, but will not come across one who has met God.

By contact with such a Sadhu, says Nishkulanand, sins of countless are burnt away.

- Nishkulānand Kāvya, Sārsiddhi 38.10

Nishkulanand Swami uses the phrase, ‘One who has met God’ for the Sadhu. Shriji Maharaj has also used the same words ‘One who has met God’ in Vachanāmruts, Vartāl 10 and Jetalpur 1. What is meant by the words ‘One who has met God’? Five hundred *paramhansas* were living with Shriji Maharaj. Does this imply that all of them can lead one to final emancipation since all of them had ‘met’ Shriji Maharaj?

Also, the *paramhansas* and the householders were no ordinary people. Parvatbhai of Agatrai, Dada Khachar of Gadhada, Devji Bhakta of Nenpur, metaphorically speaking, were ‘the beads of Shriji Maharaj’s rosary’. Among the sadhus were Muktanand Swami, saintliness personified and the loving guardian of Satsang; Gopalanand Swami, master of ashtanga yoga; Nityanand Swami, eminent scholar; Brahmanand Swami, extraordinary poet and outstanding artist; Premanand Swami, master poet and singer; Nishkulanand Swami, embodiment of *tyāg* and *vairāgya*; Vyapakanand Swami, who could revive the lifeless; Sachchidanand Swami, who challenged Indra and made it rain; Swarupanand Swami, who emptied the agonizing pits of hell; and Santdas, who freely travelled in human form to and from Badrikāshram in samadhi. All of them were highly virtuous and were full of dignity and glory. They all had met Shriji Maharaj. The words ‘who have met God’ do not, however, imply emancipation through the hundreds of thousands of householders or the 500 *paramhansas* who had met Shriji Maharaj.

If these words imply emancipation only through those householders and *paramhansas* who had physical contact with Shriji Maharaj, then the road to final

moksha would come to a dead end once they had all passed away. That, however, is not Shriji Maharaj's implication or intention. He wants to perennially keep the road to liberation open for countless *jivas*. The words 'who have met God' therefore do not imply those who actually lived during Shriji Maharaj's lifetime. 'Who has met God' refers to one who is in 'constant rapport with God, and in whom God has revealed himself completely'.

Only Aksharbrahman has such constant rapport with God. Besides Aksharbrahman, no one has such contact with God. Aksharbrahman is however only one. God's manifestation is therefore through one only.

Gunatitanand Swami has clarified, "At any given time, *moksha* [liberation] is attained from one whom God has entrusted the task of granting *moksha.* Just as, when Parikshit was cursed to die, Vyasji and many other greats were present, but *moksha* was attained only when Shukji came" (Swāmini Vāto 4.48).

In Ahmedabad, Aksharbrahman Gunatitanand Swami said to Acharya Keshavprasadji Maharaj, "As your father has handed over to you the keys of the treasury, similarly Swaminarayan has given me the responsibility of the key of emancipation."

Out of 500 *paramhansas,* the key of liberation was given to only one – Gunatitanand Swami. It has been nobly preserved to this day in the Gunātit spiritual succession. Through precepts, the *gunātit* gurus impart the knowledge for *moksha*. This enables countless *jivas* to become *brahmarup*, so as to ultimately dwell in Akshardhām. In no other Sampradaya can such a spiritual succession of pure gurus be found.

During Gunatitanand Swami's lifetime and thereafter, history bears witness to the fact that many sadhus were full of saintliness, spiritual enlightment and completely detached; yet Shriji Maharaj always fully reveals himself through only one Sadhu who opens the gates of liberation. Many prominent persons have had the contact of that Sadhu and influenced others to do likewise.

In the spiritual line of gurus, Shriji Maharaj has revealed himself successively through one particular *gunātit* Sadhu. The Sadhu's life and works amply demonstrate his incomparable saintliness.

There is also a school of thought advocating the present manifestation of both Akshar and Purushottam (as Shriji Maharaj and Gunatitanand Swami were two forms). But according to the philosophical doctrine of Shriji Maharaj, he manifests only through *gunātit*. After his return to the divine abode, he does not repeatedly manifest with Aksharbrahman. He liberates the *jivas* by revealing himself through Aksharbrahman.

After Shriji Maharaj's return to the divine abode, he remains *pragat* through the *gunātit* Sadhu. In future also, as advocated by Shriji Maharaj, it will be through only one. Shriji Maharaj emphatically states that one who has the contact of the *pragat* form at a given point of time, should be faithful to only that form, "A devotee should have firm fidelity to God. Specifically, like a woman who observes the vow of fidelity, he would never develop the same affection towards even other *mukta* sadhus – however great they may be – as he has developed towards whichever form of God he has had

the darshan of" (Vachanāmrut, Gadhadā III 16).

5.9 Characteristics of the Gunātit Sadhu

The aspirant should know the traits of a *gunātit* Sadhu through whom Shriji Maharaj is *pragat*. He should find and recognize a Sadhu who has the characteristics of a *gunātit* Sadhu as given in the shastras and seek his refuge to attain final liberation. On the other hand, if he is impressed by dress, oratory, superficial knowledge of the shastras, expertise in worldly arts, petty achievements or miracles, and credulously regards someone else as the *pragat* form of the divine, he attains Hell instead of Akshardhām.

Sadguru Nishkulanand Swami says:

Sāchā Santnā ang endhān re, joi levā jivadiye;
Jene malave mānyu kalyān re, tene jovā ghadi ghadiye

The *jiva* (seeker) should know the essential traits of a genuine Sadhu.

He, whose company can liberate, should be seen [contacted] time and again.

- Chosath Padi 9

Sadguru Brahmanand Swami also says:

Jadbuddhi jiva, Prabhu padne ichchhe to kar Santnu pārkhu;
Rang pitapane, sonu ne pittal na hoy ek sarkhu.

O *jiva*, the dullard, if you are keen to know God, thoroughly examine a Sadhu;

Both brass and gold are yellow in colour, but they are not the same.

It is therefore absolutely necessary to know exactly the Sadhu's characteristics before surrendering to him. The shastras sing the glory of the Sadhu, and in the same breath narrate the essential traits of a true Sadhu.

In the Bhagavad Gitā, characteristics of a *sthitapragna* being (one with steadfast intellect) are described in the second chapter, the attributes of a dear devotee of God are narrated in the 12th chapter, and in the 14th chapter, innate qualities of the *gunātit* Sadhu are mentioned.

Tulsidasji also mentions the qualities of a God-like Sadhu in the Rāmāyan;

Nāri nayan shar jāhi na lāgā
Ghor krodh tam nishi jo jāgā
Lobh pāsh jehi gar na bandhāyā
So nar tumha samān Raghurāyā

He who is not wounded by the arrows from a maiden's eyes;

Who is wide awake in the pitch darkness of anger, i.e., does not get angry;

Who is not shackled by the fetters of greed;

Such a person, Shri Rama is exactly like you.

- Kishkindhā Kānd: Chopāi following 20th verse

It is stated in Shrimad Bhāgavat:

Tasmād gurum prapadhyeta jignāsuhu shreya uttamam,
Shābde pare cha nishnātam brahmanyupashamāshrayam.

Therefore an aspirant should, for his own spiritual well-being, accept the tutelage of

a guru who is an expert in the knowledge of Brahman and through *brahmic* consciousness has attained the *upsham* state.

- Shrimad Bhāgavat 11.3.21

Vachanāmrut, the quintessence of all shastras, describes in detail the characteristics of a *gunātit* Sadhu. A few excerpts are given below:

"What are the characteristics of a *Sant* who is worthy of being worshipped on par with God? Well, such a *Sant* suppresses the actions of *māyā's gunas* – the *indriyas*, the *antahkaran*, etc.; but he himself does not get suppressed by their actions. In addition to this, he only performs activities related to God; he is staunch in his observance of the five religious vows; and believing himself to be *brahmarup*, he worships Purushottam Bhagwan. Such a *Sant* should not be thought of as a human being, nor should he be thought of as a deity, because such behaviour is not possible for either humans or deities. Indeed, even though that *Sant* appears to be human, he is still worthy of being worshipped on par with God. Therefore, whoever desires to attain liberation should serve such a *Sant*" (Vachanāmrut, Gadhadā III 26).

"Similarly, the attributes of the *Sant* – being free of lust, avarice, egotism, taste, attachment, etc. – are also described in the shastras. The *Sant* who possesses these attributes has a direct relationship with God" (Vachanāmrut, Gadhadā III 27).

"One should also attach one's *jiva* to the *Bhakta* of God – the great *Sant* – who does not identify his self with the body, who possesses *vairāgya*, and who feels that he has transgressed a major injunction of God even if he has transgressed a minor injunction. One should act according to his command by thought, word and deed" (Vachanāmrut, Gadhadā III 38).

"Therefore, as long as a person believes the body to be his true self, his entire understanding is totally useless; and as long as he continues to harbour vanity of his caste or ashram, he will never imbibe the virtues of a sadhu. Thus, after discarding the feelings of I-ness and my-ness for the body and its relations, believing one's *ātmā* to be *brahmarup,* and after forsaking all worldly desires, if a person worships God while observing *swadharma*, he should be known as a sadhu" (Vachanāmrut, Gadhadā I 44).

"*Bhāgavat* dharma is upheld by maintaining profound love towards the *Ekāntik Sant* of God, who possesses the attributes of *swadharma*, *jnān*, *vairāgya,* and bhakti coupled with knowledge of God's greatness. Maintaining profound love towards such a *Sant* also opens the gateway to liberation" (Vachanāmrut, Gadhadā I 54).

"Only one whose mind has a craving for God and which becomes neither 'hot' nor 'cold' by the *vishays* should be known as a sadhu" (Vachanāmrut, Gadhadā II 23).

Comparing a Sadhu with the *vadvānal* (sub-ocean) fire, Gunatitanand Swami says, "*'Pushpa-hārāya sarpāya'* – i.e., to such a Sadhu, a garland and a serpent are the same. He holds the image of God at all times. His definition of Satsang is: concentrating on *ātmā* and Paramātmā. Guiding many *jivas* to worship God, he maintains his pristine purity and never violates even a minor injunction" (Swāmini Vāto 5.142).

In addition to the above extracts, other Vachanāmruts such as Gadhadā I 27, Gadhadā III 35, etc. describe the attributes of a Sadhu in whom God reveals himself.

The attributes of a genuine renunciant are given in Vachanāmrut, Gadhadā I 36 and I 37. Many other Vachanāmruts also refer to the traits of a genuine devotee and an *Ekāntik Bhakta*.

The qualities of the Sadhu have also been vividly and clearly described by Sadguru Nishkulanand Swami in *Chosath Padi*, Sadguru Muktanand Swami, Sadguru Brahmanand Swami, as well as in the kirtans of other sadhus.

5.10 Glory of the Gunātit Sadhu

Being *pragat* through a *gunātit* Sadhu, Shriji Maharaj liberates infinite *jivas*. The glory and majesty of such a Sadhu have been repeatedly described in the Vachanāmrut, Swāmini Vāto, other shastras, and the devotional poems – kirtans of the *paramhansas* and other devotee-poets. Let us now see some of their observations.

5.10.1 Glory of the Gunātit Sadhu: In the Words of Bhagwan Swaminarayan

"A *Sant* with such a conviction is so highly respected by me that even I place the dust of his feet on my head. In my mind, I am afraid of harming him, and I also long to have his darshan. …In fact, the darshan of such a true *Bhakta* of God is equivalent to the darshan of God himself. He is so great that his darshan alone can liberate countless wretched *jivas"* (Vachanāmrut, Gadhadā I 37).

"God and the abode of God are not even an atom's distance away from [such] a Sadhu. …When one has the darshan of such a *Sant,* one should realize, 'I have had the darshan of God himself'" (Vachanāmrut, Sārangpur 10).

"No distance remains between Purushottam Bhagwan and a person who has cultivated such qualities of a sadhu" (Vachanāmrut, Gadhadā I 44).

"He also possesses countless noble virtues such as *jnān*, bhakti, *vairāgya*, etc. God eternally resides in the heart of such a devotee. Consequently, by the grace of God, that devotee attains countless types of powers and liberates countless beings. …Despite these powers, though, he tolerates the praises and insults of other people. This itself is also a great feat, because to tolerate despite being so powerful is not easy for others to achieve. Therefore, one who tolerates in this manner should be considered to be extremely great. The powers of such a person are such that since it is God who sees through his eyes, he empowers the eyes of all of the beings in the *brahmānd*; and since it is God who walks through his legs, he is also capable of endowing the strength to walk to the legs of all of the beings in the *brahmānd*. Thus, since it is God who resides in all of the *indriyas* of such a *Sant*, that *Sant* is able to empower the *indriyas* of all beings in the *brahmānd*. Therefore, such a *Sant* is the sustainer of the world" (Vachanāmrut, Gadhadā I 27).

"In fact, God's *Sant* is greater than even Bhava, Brahmā, and the other deities" (Vachanāmrut, Gadhadā II 59).

"When he becomes such a sadhu by worshipping God in this way, then there is no greater status than that of a sadhu. For example, in a kingdom, the queen's authority is equal to that of the king. In the same way, that sadhu possesses as much majesty as God" (Vachanāmrut, Gadhadā II 22).

"Similarly, the great *Purush,* like the *vadvānal* fire, transforms even the 'salty' *jivas* who are like the saline sea water, into 'sweet' *jivas*. …The person who is like the v*advānal* fire is known as God's *Param-Ekāntik Sant* – who is perfectly God-realized" (Vachanāmrut, Vartāl 3).

It is evident from the above observations in the Vachanāmrut that according to Shriji Maharaj, the *gunātit* Sadhu has as much honour and as much glory as God. Whatever fruits are therefore attained by worshipping God, by abiding by his dictates, by pleasing him and by his contact, are also equally attained through the Gunātit Sadhu.

Shriji Maharaj further adds, "If one serves such a *Sant*, one earns merits equivalent to having served God" (Vachanāmrut, Gadhadā III 35).

"By performing with extreme affection such similar service of God and the *Sant* who possesses the highest qualities, even if he is a devotee of the lowest type and was destined to become a devotee of the highest type after two lives, or after four lives, or after ten lives, or after a hundred lives, he will become a devotee of the highest calibre in this very life. Such are the fruits of the similar service of God and God's *Bhakta*" (Vachanāmrut, Vartāl 5).

"If the extremely great *Purush* becomes pleased upon a person, then regardless of how unfavourable the person's samskars may be, they are all destroyed. Moreover, if the great *Purush* is pleased*,* a beggar can become a king; regardless of how unfavourable a person's *prārabdha* may be, it becomes favourable; and regardless of how disastrous a misfortune he is to face, it is avoided" (Vachanāmrut, Gadhadā I 58).

"Intense love (*dradh priti*) for the *Satpurush* is the only means to realizing one's *ātmā*; it is the only means to realizing the greatness of the *Satpurush;* and it is also the only means to having the direct realization of God" (Vachanāmrut, Vartāl 11).

In a number of Vachanāmruts, it is mentioned that a devotee is endowed with virtues by the contact, service and worship of a *gunātit* Sadhu; and his bliss leads to attachment to God, removal of inner flaws, erosion of passion, and finally it culminates in a devotion that is full of dharma and *jnān*. And the *jiva* is extremely exalted by the Sadhu. Precisely for this reason, we can achieve whatever we desire through a Gunātit Sadhu.

Shriji Maharaj therefore asserts, "The profound association of the *Sant* that I have attained is like a magnificent *chintāmani* (magic stone) and a *kalpavruksh* (tree that give the desired fruits)" (Vachanāmrut, Gadhadā I 14).

5.10.2 Glory of the Gunātit Sadhu: In the Words of Gunatitanand Swami

Aksharbrahman Gunatitanand Swami describes the glory of the great Sadhu, "He is great, has realized God, lives according to the commands of God, tolerates hardships; God is under his control, God does as he says, God travels to wherever he says; he has won over God, he knows the opinions of God, he grants *moksha,* by his darshan one has the darshan of God, by worshipping him one worships God; he frees us from having to stay in the womb, hell and the cycles of birth and death and helps us attain the limitless Akshardhām of God; he helps us attain similarity to God – that is how great he

is. God cannot live without him and by his darshan, the five grave sins are burnt away. By the actions of his senses the universe is enlivened, and Time, karma and *māyā* tremble before him. Just as by worshipping the body, the *jiva* is worshipped, similarly, by worshipping this Sadhu, God is worshipped. He is the provider of food; the indweller, omniscient, all-doer, and he appears to be like a human but is not human. God continuously stays with him, he helps one attain the eternal abode; he is the doer, yet is the non-doer; like a tree, his body is for the benefit of others; he possesses the qualities of the genuine Sadhu which have been described in the shastras; he is '*kāmil, kābil sub hunar tere hath'* [he is pure and perfect and has mastered all the arts]" (Swāmini Vāto 4.143).

"The Sadhu is greater than all. His glory was narrated. The details: bigger than all is earth and then from water, fire, wind, space, *ahamkār, mahatattva,* Pradhan-Purush, Mul Prakruti-Purush upto Akshar, each one is bigger than the preceding one. And God is the support of all. The Sadhu continually beholds this great God in his heart. Therefore, he is great" (Swāmini Vāto 2.110).

5.10.3 Glory of the Gunātit Sadhu: In the Bhajans of the Paramhansas

(A) Sadguru Nishkulanand Swami has eulogized such a great *Ekāntik* Sadhu in Purushottam Prakāsh, Bhaktachintāmani, Chosath Padi and in many of his kirtans. He has written in Purushottam Prakāsh:

Sant bole te bhelo hu bolu re, Sant na bhule hu ye na bhulu re;
Sant vāt bheli karu vāt re, em Santmā chhau sākshāt re.
Sant juve te bhelo hu jou re, Sant sutā pachhi hu sou re;
Sant jāge te bhelo hu jāgu re, Sant joi ati anurāgu re.
Sant jame te bhelo hu jamu re, Sant bhame te kedye hu bhamu re;
Sant dukhāne hu dukhāno re, eh vāt satya jan jāno re,
Sant hu ne hu te vali Sant re, em Shri mukhe kahe Bhagwānt re,
Sant mānajo māri murati re, emā fer nathi ek rati re.

The Sadhu speaks and I speak with him. The Sadhu forgets not, and I also do not forget.

The Sadhu talks, and I talk with him. Thus I reveal myself thoroughly through the Sadhu.

The Sadhu looks and I look with him. I sleep after he sleeps.

I get up before he arises. I see him and am filled with joy.

The Sadhu eats and I eat with him. The Sadhu walks, I follow him.

The Sadhu is grieved, I suffer the pain. Believe this as the gospel truth;

The Sadhu is myself and I am the Sadhu. Thus says God himself,

The Sadhu is my very image – without the slightest difference.

- Purushottam Prakāsh 41.6-9

Evā Sant jamye jamyā Shyām, jamyā sahu devatā;
Jamyā sarve lok sarve dhām, sahu thayā truptatā.
Evā Sant malye malyā Swami, khāmi koye nā rahi;

Kahe Nishkulānand shish nāmi, sāchi sahune kahi.

When the Sadhu eats, God and all the deities are fed.

All the cosmoses and all the abodes are contented.

Communion with such a Sadhu is like communion with God and no inadequacy is ever felt.

Bowing his head in all humility, Nishkulanand says, I tell you only the truth.

- Chosath Padi 3

Sant krupāe sukh upaje, Sant krupāthi sare kām;
Sant krupāthi pāmie, Puran Purushottam dhām.
Sant krupāthi sadmati jāge, Sant krupāthi sadguna;
Sant krupā vinā sadhutā, kahone pāmyā kuna.
Sant sevyā tene sarve sevyā, sevyā Shri Hari Bhagwān;
Rushi muni sevyā devatā, jene Sant karyā rāji man.
Kāmadughā[16] *kalpataru*[17]*, pāras*[18] *chintāmani*[19] *chār;*
Sant samān eke nahi, me manmā karyo vichār.

Bliss follows through the Sadhu's grace and all ends are served.

By the Sadhu's grace is attained Purushottam's abode.

Through the Sadhu's grace, wise counsel prevails and virtues flourish.

Without the Sadhu's grace, who has acquired saintliness?

By serving the Sadhu, all are served and God is also worshipped.

He who pleases the Sadhu, has served the rishis, sages and deities.

The foursome of *kāmadughā, kalpataru, pāras* and *chintāmani*

Pale into insignificance before the Sadhu. This is my considered opinion.

- Bhaktachintāmani 2

Dhanya dhanya e Sant sujānane, jenu ulati palatyu āp,
Sant te swayam Hari
Āp tali malyā Bhagwānmā,jenā āpmā Harino vyāp,
Sant te swayam Hari.

The Sadhu is indeed fortunate, whose inner self is completely changed.

The Sadhu is God himself.

He (the Sadhu) who has effaced the self, merges in God and is possessed by him.

The Sadhu is God himself.

(B) Sadguru Muktanand Swami says:

Aise mere jan Ekāntik, tehi sam aur na koi;
Muktānand kahat yu Mohan, mero hi sarvasva soi.

No one can be on par with my *Ekāntik* Sadhu.

God says, 'For me, he is my all.'

Muktānand mahā Santne, Prabhu pragat pāse re;
Anubhavine antare rahe Rāma vāse re.

God manifest is close to the great Sadhu.

In the heart of an enlightened one, God always resides.

(C) Sadguru Brahmanand Swami says:

Brahmānand kahe Santki sobat, milat he Pragat Murāri,
Jagatmāhi Sant param hitakāri.

The company of the Sadhu is like meeting God himself.
Our only well-wisher in the whole world is the Sadhu.

(D) Sadguru Premanand Swami writes:

Āthe pahor ānand jenā angmā,
rame Govind evā Santnā re sangmā;

God is one with the Sadhu, who is constantly brimming with joy.

Evā Sant Harine pyārā re,
Tethi ghadie na rahe Vālo nyārā re.

Such a sadhu is dearest to God; He doesn't leave him for a moment.

Evā Santni balihāri re, Jene gune rijhyā Giradhāri re.

Glory to the Sadhu, whose innate goodness has won over God.

5.10.4 Glory of the Gunātit Sadhu: In the Bhajans of Well-Known Devotee-Poets

Well-known devotee-poets Narsinh Mehta, Mirabai, Pritam, Dayaram, Surdas, Tulsidas and others are ecstatic in their poems while praising the *gunātit* Sadhu and have placed him on par with God.

(A) Narsinh Mehta has written:

Prān thaki mune Vaishnav vahālā,
rāt divas hrude bhāvu re;
Tapa tirath Vaikunth pad meli,
mārā harijan hoy tyā hu āvu re.
Lakshmiji ardhānganā māri,
te mārā Santni dāsi re;
Adasath tirath mārā Santne charane,
koti Gangā koti Kāshi re.

Vaishnavs are dearer to me than my life. Day and night, I think of them; Leaving aside austerities, holy places and Vaikunth, I rush to wherever my devotees are.

Lakshmiji, who is my wife, faithfully serves the Sadhu; All the 68 holy places lie at the feet of my Sadhu. They [the feet] are as sacred as a million Gangās and Kāshis.

(B) Tulsidas says:

Ramsindhu ghan sajjan dhirā,
chandantaru Hari Sant samirā;
More man Prabhu as bisvāsā,
Rāma te adhik Rāma kar dāsā.

If Rama is the ocean, the pious Sadhu is a monsoon cloud.

If Rama is the sandalwood tree, the Sadhu is the cool scented breeze.

I am quite sure in my mind that – Rama's Sadhu is greater than even Rama.

- Uttar Kānd, Chopāi following 119th verse

(C) Pritam says:

Sant harijan ek hai, bhinna na māno koi;
Pritam Sadguru mile, tāku mālum hoy.

The Sadhu and God are the same. Do not distinguish between them.

Pritam says only one who has met the Sadguru realizes this fact.

(D) Sant Kabir says:

Sāhabakā ghar Santanmāhi,
Sant Sāhab kachhu antar nāhi.

God dwells in the Sadhu. There is no distance between God and the Sadhu.

5.10.5 Glory of the Gunātit Sadhu: In Other Shastras

In the Upanishads, Bhagavad Gitā, Shrimad Bhāgavat, Rāmāyan and other shastras, there are numerous references to the Sadhu's greatness and glory, as can be seen from the following excerpts:

Yasya deve parābhaktir-yathā deve tathā gurau,
Tasyaite kathitā hyarthāhā prakāshante mahātmanaha.

If the *jiva* serves the *pragat* guru in the same spirit as he worships the *paroksh* form of God, he achieves all that is worth achieving.

- Shvetāshvatara Upanishad 6.23

Sādhavo hridayam mahyam Sādhunām hridayam tvaham,
Madanyatte na jānanti nāham tebhyo manāgapi.

The Sadhu is my heart. And I am the Sadhu's heart.

Just as he does not recognize anyone as superior to me, I also do not treat anyone superior to him.

- Shrimad Bhāgavat 9.4.68

Nirapeksham munim shāntam nirvairam samadarshanam,
Anuvrajāmyaham nityam puyeyetyanghrirenubhihi.

I constantly follow the detached, contemplative, quiet, unbiased and righteous sadhus;

So that if I receive the dust of their feet, I shall be purified.

- Shrimad Bhāgavat 11.14.16

Does this mean that God is not pure? God certainly is. Only to illustrate the endless glory of his Sadhu, does he speak about him in such glowing terms.

5.11 The Gunātit Sadhu: The Pragat Form of God Yet a Loyal Servant

The shastras, Bhagwan Swaminarayan and the sadhu-poets have placed the *gunātit* Sadhu on par with God, or even on a higher plane, as seen in the previous pages. Nevertheless, the *gunātit* Sadhu always serves Shriji Maharaj as a loyal servant. Gunatitanand Swami in the Swāmini Vāto identifies himself as the master of all, yet at the same time the servant of Purushottam.

Brahmanand Swami has written:

Sāmrath pāy kabu nahi chhalakat, jyu udadhi ke toy;
Brahmānand kahyo Shri mukhase, eso jan priya moy.

Though extremely powerful, the Sadhu does not demonstrate his competency, like the ocean waters that never overflow.

Brahmanand says that God himself declares, 'Such a Sadhu is my beloved.'

The *gunātit* Sadhu has as much power as God. It is, however, a fact that all the powers, dignity and authority of the Sadhu are due to Purushottam Nārāyan. Shriji Maharaj says: "By considering their association with God, it is acceptable to endow greatness upon anyone. Brahmā, Shiva, Narad, the Sanakādik and Uddhava can all be called God because of their association with God. At present, even a sadhu like Muktanand Swami can be considered to be like God because of his association with God. Without God, however, even Akshar cannot be called God – let alone anyone else" (Vachanāmrut, Loyā 13).

The *gunātit* Sadhu never becomes God himself. But God, in all respects, dwells in him. The darshan of the *gunātit* Sadhu is therefore equivalent to the darshan of God. Principally, "Transcending that Brahman is Parabrahman – Purushottam Nārāyan – who is distinct from Brahman, and is the cause, the supporter and the inspirer of Brahman" (Vachanāmrut, Gadhadā II 3).

In our succession of *gunātit* gurus, no one has ever even dreamt of being God or becoming God. In the assembly at Vartal when Gunatitanand Swami was insulted, somebody commented, "Gunatitanand Swami wants to become God."

Swami unhesitatingly retorted, "No one can become God. Only Shriji Maharaj is God. If anyone calls me God, he will be considered as good as a donkey."

Shastriji Maharaj often used to say, "We are the bullocks of Akshar Purushottam." He also used to clarify, "Shriji Maharaj alone is God. Anyone worshipping me as God will be consigned to Hell."

Like Shastriji Maharaj and Yogiji Maharaj, today His Divine Holiness Pramukh Swami Maharaj always serves as a humble servant of Parabrahman Purushottam Nārāyan. This is amply demonstrated by his unpretentious, humble life.

God manifests through Aksharbrahman. We shall examine in the next chapter the form of Aksharbrahman, his powers and glory, and how he helps aspirants on the path to *moksha*.

16. Wish-fulfilling cow.
17. Wish-fulfilling tree.
18 Philosopher's stone (popularly known as a stone that turns iron into gold by touch).
19 Wish-fulfilling gem.

6. AKSHARBRAHMAN

All the Vedic philosophies and commentators accept Parabrahman as the highest and the most sublime entity. But nowhere is it clearly discussed what exactly Aksharbrahman is. The dignity, form and attributes of Brahman are profusely expounded in the shastras. The shastras by and large describe Brahman as Parabrahman. Even the learned *āchāryas* – who have written commentaries on the shastras – have explained that often Brahman is synonymous with Parabrahman. However in certain Shrutis, Brahman is clearly described as distinct from Parabrahman. No one has elaborated on the entity of Brahman as clearly as Shriji Maharaj. In Swaminarayan Darshan, Aksharbrahman is described as the fourth entity which transcends the three entities of *jiva*, *ishwar* and *māyā*. Aksharbrahman is described as the supporter of these three, and as pervading them and transcending them. However, Aksharbrahman is still inferior to Parabrahman. This entity is traditionally also known as 'Akshar' or 'Brahman'.

Aksharbrahman has a prominent place in the Swaminarayan *upāsanā*. Ultimate liberation is to attain *brahmabhāv* and devoutly worship Parabrahman Paramātmā Bhagwan Swaminarayan. All followers of the Sampradaya offer *upāsanā* to Bhagwan Swaminarayan. However, this *upāsanā* is not fulfilled without Aksharbrahman.

Through Aksharbrahman Parabrahman is known precisely and *māyā* is eradicated. One then becomes *brahmarup* and attains ultimate liberation. Akshar is the means to the attainment of Purushottam. It is therefore quite essential to clearly understand the relationship between Akshar and Purushottam.

6.1 Becoming Aksharrup and Offering Upāsanā to Purushottam with Swami-Sevak Bhāv

Shriji Maharaj has instructed us to develop the highest category of *nirvikalp* faith *(uttam nirvikalp nishchay)*. Only through *nirvikalp* faith can one understand the sublime form of Purushottam Nārāyan. All followers of the Sampradaya in their evening prayers request for this by singing:

Nirvikalp uttam ati nishchay tav Ghanshyām...

O Ghanshyam, kindly favour us with the highest category of *nirvikalp* faith.

- Sadguru Premanand Swami

Shriji Maharaj has explained the highest category of *nirvikalp* faith in the following manner, "One possessing the highest level of 'nirvikalp faith' realizes that countless millions of *brahmānds* – each encircled by the eight barriers – appear like mere atoms before Akshar. Such is the greatness of Akshar, the abode of Purushottam Nārāyan. One who worships Purushottam realizing oneself to be *aksharrup* can be said to possess the highest level of 'nirvikalp faith' " (Vachanāmrut, Loyā 12).

In these words of Shriji Maharaj, the highest category of *nirvikalp* faith is basically becoming *aksharrup* to devoutly worship Purushottam.

Again Maharaj says, "Transcending that Brahman is Parabrahman, Purushottam Nārāyan – who is distinct from Brahman – and is the cause, the supporter and the inspirer of Brahman. With such understanding, one's *jivātmā* should develop oneness with that Brahman, and worship Parabrahman while maintaining a master-servant relationship with Him" (Vachanāmrut, Gadhadā II 3).

The same injunction is also mentioned in the Shikshāpatri:

Nijātmānam brahmarupam dehatraya-vilakshanam,
Vibhāvya tena kartavyā bhaktihi Krishnasya sarvadā.

Believe oneself as *brahmarup*, separate from the three bodies – *sthul, sukshma* and *karan* – then in that *brahmarup* state always offer devotion to Parabrahman.

- Shikshāpatri 116

The Satsangijivan also mentions, "An aspirant should know through *sāmkhya jnān* the distinct identity of the *ātmā* from the three bodies – *sthul* (gross), *sukshma* (subtle) and *kāran* (causal). He also should know *ishwar* to be distinct from *virāt, sutrātmā* and *avyākrut*. Then as the *ātmā,* the self should identify with personified Aksharbrahman. The seeker after reaching the *brahmarup* stage should offer his worship to Vāsudev*,* i.e., Shriji Maharaj."[20]

Stressing the importance of thoroughly knowing Akshar and complete identification with him, Shriji Maharaj says, "Identifying one's *jiva* with Aksharbrahman, one who worships Purushottam is indeed praiseworthy. And one who distinguishes the *jiva* and Akshar*,* and fails to realize the unity between them should be condemned" (*Vedras,* p.220).

"Knowing one's *ātmā* and Akshar as one, one who offers his worship to Purushottam Paramātmā deserves compliments, and one who does not realize the *Swami-sevakbhāv* with Purushottam, but treats them as one, deserves condemnation" (*Vedras,* p.220).

From this it must be clearly realized that the *jiva* should develop oneness with Akshar and offer *upāsanā* to Purushottam with *Swami-sevakbhāv*.

Aksharbrahman Gunatitanand Swami had a thorough understanding of Shriji Maharaj's principles. Once he asked someone to read Vachanāmruts Gadhadā I 23, Gadhadā II 30 and II 45, Ahmedābād 2 and 3. The five Vachanāmruts were re-read twice or thrice. Gunatitanand Swami then said, "Listening to these Vachanāmruts, I have concluded that even after millions of years, without behaving in this way [becoming *aksharrup* and worshipping Purushottam], there is no final release. So, for us, there is no alternative but to follow that path. Also, even if one is an *āchārya*, a son of God, an *ishwar* or some small or big deity, still there is no release without behaving in that way. Since, that is Maharaj's belief" (Swāmini Vāto 3.13).

To arrive at the stage of *aksharrup* and offer one's devotion to Purushottam through *Swami-sevakbhāv*, i.e., to be *brahmarup* and be devoted to Parabrahman with *Swami-sevakbhāv* is the timeless fundamental principle propounded by Bhagwan Swaminarayan. Therefore it is essential for us – his followers – to become *aksharrup or*

brahmarup. Maharaj has explained the need of becoming *aksharrup* in the Vachanāmrut in different ways which we will now consider.

6.2 The Need to Become Brahmarup

6.2.1 For the Privilege of Worshipping Purushottam

Everyone worships God. But who is rightly privileged to do so? Shriji Maharaj explains: "Only one who is *brahmarup* has the right to offer bhakti to Purushottam" (Vachanāmrut, Loyā 7).

The same principle is propounded by Shri Krishna Bhagwan in the Gitā:

Brahmabhutaha prasannātmā na shochati na kānkshati,
Samaha sarveshu bhuteshu mad-bhaktim labhate parām.

One who has become *brahmarup* remains joyful, grieves for nothing, desires nothing, behaves equally with all beings, and attains my supreme bhakti.

- Bhagavad Gitā 18.54

6.2.2 For Unhindered Devotion

Shriji Maharaj warns "As long as one has not attained this elevated spiritual state, one is subject to obstacles, even if one is a devotee of God. Shivji, for example, did not behave in such an elevated spiritual state and was therefore enticed by the beauty of Mohini. Brahmā also did not behave in such a state and thus became infatuated on seeing Saraswati. Nāradji also did not behave in such an elevated spiritual state and consequently harboured a desire to marry. Moreover, because Indra, Chandra and others were not behaving in such a state, their reputations were also blemished due to their mistakes" (Vachanāmrut, Gadhadā I 23).

For unhindered devotion to God, it is essential to become one with Aksharbrahman. Otherwise, there is the constant risk of downfall. In the absence of such a state, one is likely to be distracted by the body, the *gunas*, or the states of consciousness, and inevitably lapse into the enjoyment of sensual pleasures. It may also lead to attributing human weaknesses to God.

For an aspirant, the two greatest hurdles on the spiritual path are lust and wealth. How can they be overcome? According to Shriji Maharaj, "Gold and women are the source of extreme attachment…and one does not become attached to these two when one realizes the pure *chaitanya* Brahman – which transcends Prakruti-Purush – as the only *satya*; and when one realizes that Brahman to be one's own self; and when one becomes *brahmarup* and worships Shri Krishna Bhagwan, who is Parabrahman" (Vachanāmrut, Gadhadā II 30).

Gunatitanand Swami also says, "In this universe, there is no man who does not desire a woman, and no woman who does not desire a man. To separate each from the other, Maharaj has written one *shlok: 'Nijātmānam brahmarupam…'* i.e., believe one's true self as *ātmā,* not the body. Just as there are no stones when one digs [the soil] of Gujarat deep down into the earth, similarly, there are no faults in one who is *brahmarup*" (Swāmini Vāto 1.141).

"By following the instruction in the Shikshapatri, desires are destroyed. Which

instruction? That of '*Nijātmānam brahmarupam'* – if this instruction is followed, the causal body is destroyed" (Swāmini Vāto 5.72).

Therefore, to remove all obstacles on the path of devotion, it is necessary to overcome human imperfections and become *brahmarup*.

6.2.3 For Ultimate Liberation

"Without the true *jnān* of God, even the *prajāpatis* and other creators of the cosmos have to repeatedly take birth along with the creation and then ultimately merge back into *māyā*. But they do not attain Akshardhām, the abode of Shri Purushottam Bhagwan. The reason for this is a flaw in their understanding" (Vachanāmrut, Ashlāli).

The reason for this is four flaws in their understanding, the second of which Maharaj explains, "Secondly, they do not realize that becoming *aksharrup* and serving Shri Purushottam Nārāyan is in itself liberation. This is their second mistake" (Vachanāmrut, Ashlāli).

If Brahmā and other creators of the universe are required to become *brahmarup* for their ultimate liberation, its need for lesser beings can hardly be overstated. Shriji Maharaj therefore maintains, "Thus, one who does not offer bhakti to Parabrahman after becoming *brahmarup* cannot be said to have attained ultimate liberation" (Vachanāmrut, Loyā 7).

6.3 The Necessity of Aksharbrahman on the Path of Liberation

6.3.1 To Become Brahmarup

Tatra brahmātmānā Krishna-sevā muktishcha gamyatām .

- Shikshāpatri 121

Explaining the definition of liberation or *moksha*, Shriji Maharaj says: "Ultimate *mukti* or liberation is serving Parabrahman in the divine abode, after becoming *brahmarup*."

Having realized the necessity of attaining the *brahmarup* state, the obvious question is how to become *brahmarup*? According to Maharaj, ignorance, passion and attachment to the body are not undone by any means. They can only be eradicated by the company of Brahman. The influence of *māyā* can only be removed by association with Brahman, because in Brahman there is no trace or influence of *māyā*.

Shriji Maharaj states, "If one associates with Brahman through continuous contemplation in this manner, the *jiva* acquires the virtues of that Brahman" (Vachanāmrut, Gadhadā II 31).

The Shrutis also declares:

Brahma veda Brahmaiva bhavati,

He who knows Brahman becomes *brahmarup*.

- Mundaka Upanishad 3.2.9

It is quite essential then to know and to be associated with Aksharbrahman in order to do away with the influence of *māyā* and become *brahmarup*. Gunatitanand Swami also says: "One can become *brahmarup* by believing this Gunatit Sadhu to be *brahmarup* and associating with him through one's mind, deeds and speech. Then one becomes

brahmarup" (Swāmini Vāto 3.12).

6.3.2 To Know Parabrahman As He Is

Parabrahman in his human form is forever divine. Yet those who are ignorant perceive the *pragat* form of God as under the same spell of *māyā* as a human being. Thus this question is asked in the Vachanāmrut: because the "The ten *indriyas* are produced from *rajogun,* and the four *antahkarans* are produced from *sattvagun*; thus, all of the *indriyas* and *antahkarans* are *māyik*. God, however, transcends *māyā*. How, then, can one cultivate the conviction of God through the *māyik antahkarans*?" (Vachanāmrut, Gadhadā I 51).

Shriji Maharaj answers, "When one worships God with sincerity, having faith in the words of the *Ekāntik Sant* of God, one's *māyik* vision disappears. Thereafter, one realizes that same form of God as being the supreme *chaitanya*, characterised by eternal existence, consciousness and bliss" (Vachanāmrut, Panchālā 7).

Therefore, "If a person realizes this greatness of Purushottam Bhagwan by profound association with the *Sant*, then all of his *indriyas* and *antahkaran* become divine like Purushottam Bhagwan's *indriyas* and *antahkaran.* Then, through those *indriyas* and *antahkaran*, he can develop the conviction of that God" (Vachanāmrut, Gadhadā I 51).

In Vachanāmrut, Gadhadā II 13, after revealing his glory as Purushottam in a wonderful account, Shriji Maharaj explains, "However, such discourses regarding the nature of God cannot be understood by oneself even from the shastras. Even though these facts may be in the shastras, it is only when the *Satpurush* manifests on this earth, and one hears them being narrated by him, that one understands them. They cannot, however, be understood by one's intellect alone, even from the shastras" (Vachanāmrut, Gadhadā II 13).

It is therefore evident that only through the Satpurush can one realize Maharaj as Purushottam and the Satpurush as *gunātit*. Without understanding the form of Aksharbrahman, it is impossible to have a clear realization of the glory of Purushottam as he is.

It is the highest state of knowledge to envisage divinity in the human form of Parabrahman. What is this knowledge? Maharaj explains that this knowledge transcends Prakruti-Purush (Vachanāmrut, Gadhadā I 24).

Beyond Prakriti-Purush is Akshar. Akshar is therefore the embodiment of the knowledge of Purushottam. In other words, Akshar is the most appropriate medium to understand the form of Purushottam.

Maharaj explains, "*Jal* is greater than *pruthvi*, is the cause of that *pruthvi* and is subtler than it as well. In turn, *tej* is greater than *jal*, *vāyu* is greater than *tej*, and *ākāsh* is greater than *vāyu*. In the same way, Akshar, Prakruti-Purush, Pradhān-Purush, *mahattattva* and *ahamkār* are all progressively greater than each other, the cause of each other and subtler than each other. …The cause of all of these is Aksharbrahman, which is the abode of Purushottam Bhagwan" (Vachanāmrut, Gadhadā I 63).

After understanding the importance of each entity successively, we can come to understand the importance of Akshar. Having understood the importance and vastness

of Akshar, we realize the greatness and glory of Purushottam. To realize Purushottam Nārāyan with all the associate entities – exactly as he is – it is a precondition to realize Aksharbrahman.

Shriji Maharaj has also said, "Purushottam Bhagwan enters and dwells in all of the above as their cause and *antaryāmi*. However, he does not manifest in Prakruti-Purush to the extent he manifests in Akshar" (Vachanāmrut, Gadhadā I 41).

This means that Aksharbrahman is in close proximity with Purushottam. No *mukta* can therefore realize Purushottam's glory and greatness as much as Aksharbrahman can. It is no wonder then that others cannot realize it. The condition essential to visualize the immense glory and greatness of Purushottam is to have the association of Aksharbrahman. Shriji Maharaj therefore says, "Aksharbrahman itself is like the sun in the sense that when the sun rises, all ten directions can be determined in relation to it. Akshardhām is like that; i.e., above, below, on all four sides of that Akshar – in fact, in all directions – are millions of *brahmānds*" (Vachanāmrut, Gadhadā II 42).

That is to say, only through Akshar can Purushottam be known. This is the key, the fundamental principle of correct understanding. Therefore, to cultivate indomitable faith in Purushottam Nārāyan and to understand his divine glory, it is absolutely essential to know Aksharbrahman with all his greatness and to associate with him in thought, deed and word.

The Shrutis also mention:

Brahmavidāpnoti Param,

He who knows Brahman attains Parabrahman.

- Taittiriya Upanishad 2.1

Now let us aspire to understand the glory and form of Aksharbrahman, as it is the only medium to attain Parabrahman.

6.4 The Infinite Glory of Aksharbrahman

The infinite glory of Aksharbrahman is given at length in the Vedas, Upanishads, Bhagavad Gitā and other shastras. Bhagwan Swaminarayan has also described the glory in the *Vedras* and the Vachanāmrut.

"Enwrapped by the sixteen *vikārs* – the ten *indriyas*, *panch-bhutas*, and the mind; and encircled by the eight spheres of earth, etc. – each one ten times greater than the preceding one; and five *crore yojans* [200 million miles] in dimension – a *brahmānd* (universe) appears like a tiny atom before Aksharbrahman. And before whom millions of universes appear like tiny atoms, that Aksharbrahman is the cause of all, the cause of even Prakriti and Purush, and the abode of Paramātmā himself – in the shape of a human"[21] (Shrimad Bhāgavat 3.11.40).

Akshar is the onlooker and the witness of all. Brahman is aware of them all, governs them all, controls them, and is their all-doer. Brahman is stable. It is immanent in Prakriti-Purush and is the *antaryāmi* of all. It inspires all. Brahman is unchanging and is endowed with supreme wisdom. …By its power, the entire world of Purush-Prakriti is created and sustained. That Brahman is omnipotent and subtler than the subtlest (Based on *Vedras,* p.157-9, p.165, p.213).

6.5 The Form of Aksharbrahman

Shriji Maharaj has described the form of Aksharbrahman, "Brahman is not subject to change and is indivisible. Thus, it does not undergo change, nor can it be divided. When that Brahman is equated with all forms, it is because that Brahman is the cause of all – Prakruti-Purush, etc. It is their supporter and pervades all through its *antaryāmi* powers. Furthermore, that which is the cause, the supporter and the pervader cannot be distinct from its effect. It is in reference to this context that the shastras equate that Brahman with all forms. However, one should not believe that that Brahman itself undergoes change and assumes the forms of all mobile and immobile beings (Vachanāmrut, Gadhadā II 3).

Eternal, everlasting and indivisible, Aksharbrahman – like space – pervades *māyā* and all the cosmic evolutes evolved from *māyā*, and also possesses an all-pervading influence. But Aksharbrahman is also described in its distinct form as *Satchidānand* which transcends all. This form is unaffected by Purush, Prakriti and similar afflictions. It is the dwelling place of Purushottam (from Vachanāmruts, Gadhadā I 7, Sārangpur 5, Gadhadā II 64).

6.6 The Forms of Aksharbrahman

There is only one Aksharbrahman, but because of its various duties it is described in different ways. The first reference to this is in Vachanāmrut, Gadhadā I 21 in which Shriji Maharaj says, "After an *ekāntik bhakta* leaves his body and becomes free of all influences of *māyā*, he attains Akshardhām via the *archimārg*.... That Akshar has two forms. One, which is formless and pure *chaitanya*, is known as Chidākāsh or Brahmamahol. In its other form, that Akshar remains in the service of Purushottam Nārāyan."

Here, Shriji Maharaj has described two forms of Akshar, but within these two forms another two forms are present. These other two are also described in the Vachanāmrut.

In the above reference, Bhagwan Swaminarayan first describes the formless form of Akshar as *chaitanya,* Chidākāsh and Brahmamahol. On the basis of Vachanāmrut, Gadhadā I 63 Brahmamahol refers to Aksharbrahman as God's divine abode (Dhām). And, as described in Vachanāmrut, Gadhadā I 46, Chidākāsh refers to the form which pervades avery atom.

The second form of Aksharbrahman described in the above reference is that which serves in Akshardham; and, as mentioned in Vachanāmrut, Gadhadā I 71, should also be understood as the Brahmaswarup Satpurush manifest on earth through the *gunātit guru paramparā* to guide *jivas* onto the path of *moksha* for as long as the earth exists.

In summary, Aksharbrahman can be described as serving in four forms: (1) Aksharbrahman as Chidākāsh, (2) Aksharbrahman as the abode (Dhām), (3) personal form of Aksharbrahman serving the divine abode (Dhām) and (4) manifest on earth as the Brahmaswarup Satpurush form of Aksharbrahman.

Let us now learn more about the forms of Akshar engaged in the various services.

6.7 Aksharbrahman

6.7.1 As Satchidānand Chidākāsh Radiance

Satchidānand means *Sat* – Existence, *Chit* – Consciousness, and *Ānand* – Bliss. As *Satchidānand Chidākāsh,* Aksharbrahman is imperceptibly formless and all-pervading. It is also immanent in everything. It is immanent even in the millionth part of a dust particle. This Akshar as *Chidākāsh* is imperishable, unwaning, unchanging and eternal. It is beyond creation and dissolution (Vachanāmrut, Gadhadā I 46).

Chidākāsh is the existent, conscious and blissful divine radiance of Akshar, the divine abode of God. It possesses no cause-effect relationship. As mentioned in Vachanāmrut, Gadhadā II 42, countless millions of *brahmānds* rotate in *Chidākāsh*.

Aksharbrahman, as *Satchidānand Chidākāsh* radiance, is by its *antaryāmi* power all-pervading within and without all the functions of Prakriti-Purush, as well as their supporter. This is the *nirgun* form of Akshar.

6.7.2 As the Divine Abode

This is the infinitely vast, personal (*sākār*) and *sagun* aspect of Aksharbrahman.

In reply to Kubersinh's question on Brahmapur (Akshardhām), Shriji Maharaj gives the following description, "It is *aksharrup* Brahman which has become the abode for Shri Purushottam Nārāyan to dwell in. That Aksharbrahman – in the form of the abode of God – is eternal in comparison to all the other aksharbrahmans [*aksharmuktas*]. …In addition, its splendour is countless times more than the divine riches of countless other abodes. That abode is also limitless. Just as there is no limit to *ākāsh*, regardless of the direction in which one looks, similarly, there is no limit to Brahmadhām. Whether above, below or in the four directions, there is no boundary to the abode of God. This is because it is boundless. If one were to try to reach its end, one would realize that it is endless. Such is the vastness of Brahmapur. …Countless attendants, who are also radiant and have a divine form, reside in that abode. There, they are forever eager for the service of God" (Vachanāmrut, Ahmedābād 6).

"The cause of all of these is Aksharbrahman, which is the abode of Purushottam Bhagwan. That Akshar does not have any states of contraction or expansion; it forever remains in the same state. That Akshar also possesses a form, but because it is so vast, its form cannot be visualized. For example, the *brahmānd*, which has evolved from the 24 elements, is known as Purushāvatār. That Virāt-Purush possesses hands, feet, etc., but because his form is extremely vast, he is beyond visualization. …In the same manner, despite having a definite form, Akshardhām cannot be visualized. This is because it is so vast that countless *brahmānds* float within its each and every hair. It is within that Akshardhām that Purushottam Bhagwan himself eternally resides" (Vachanāmrut, Gadhadā I 63).

Shriji Maharaj has thus described Aksharbrahman, the divine abode, as personal and with a form. It neither contracts nor expands, and so its form cannot be visualized. No one upto Mul-Purush (*mukta*) – the lord of *mul-māyā* – can fathom its vastness. To all of them, Brahman appears infinitely immeasurable. The shastras sometimes describe it as *nirākār*. However, in reality, Aksharbrahman as the divine abode of God and supporter of infinite *muktas* is personal; and has the radiance of countless suns and

moons (*Setumālā* 63.45-49).

6.7.3 As Divine, Personal and Sākār

In the abode of Akshardhām, the personal form of Aksharbrahman is divine, with humanly shape and always readily serving Purushottam Nārāyan. The personified Aksharbrahman is the ideal example of the highest devotion and service. In Vachanāmrut, Gadhadā I 21, Shriji Maharaj has specified, "In its other form, that Akshar remains in the service of Purushottam Nārāyan."

Commenting on these words, the text *Harivākyasudhāsindhu* explains:

Murtam tatrāsti Krishnasya sevāyām divyavigraham,

The divine personal form of Aksharbrahman is always there in Akshardhām serving Purushottam.

- *Harivākyasudhāsindhu* 21-22

The *Setumālā* commentary on *Harivākyasudhāsindhu* further adds:

1. "The incarnate (*sākār*) Aksharbrahman is divine, has a human-like form endowed with two hands and two feet, is strikingly attractive and is always engaged in the devotion and servitude of his master – Purushottam Nārāyan – who is even more attractive than him."[22]
2. "In his divine Akshardhām, God is being served with utter dedication as per his wishes by countless *muktas* – who have attained the qualities of Aksharbrahman – and also by the personal form of Aksharbrahman."[23]
3. "As Aksharbrahman is the chief attendant (the principal, ideal and eternally choicest *sevak*) of Purushottam Nārāyan, he has a divine and extremely attractive *sākār* human-like form with beautiful features."[24]

6.7.4 As the Param Ekāntik Satpurush

"When God incarnates for the purpose of granting liberation to the *jivas*, he is always accompanied by his Akshardhām, his attendants – who are formed of *chaitanya* – and all of his divine powers. …Therefore, a devotee of God should realize that the form of God along with his Akshardhām is present on this earth, and he should also explain this fact to others" (Vachanāmrut, Gadhadā I 71).

Shriji Maharaj – Parabrahman Purushottam Nārāyan – with infinite compassion descended on this earth in human form and became visible to all. He brought along with him the personal form of the divine abode – Aksharbrahman Gunatitanand Swami. Shriji Maharaj dwelled on this earth for 49 years and bestowed infinite bliss upon the devotees and also liberated countless souls. After returning to his abode, he remains manifest through a succession of God-realized Sadhus, who are form of Aksharbrahman, thus keeping the road to ultimate liberation open forever.

6.8 One and Unique

As observed earlier, Aksharbrahman serves as radiant light, as the divine abode, as the constant and closest *sevak* of Purushottam and as a human being on this earth. Despite his various functions, there is no essential difference as Aksharbrahman is

always one and unique.

Again, there are countless *jivas* and countless *ishwars*. All the *jivas* and *ishwars* are liberated by their direct contact with and compassion of Aksharbrahman and Parabrahman Purushottam Nārāyan. On attaining *moksha*, they are known as *akshar muktas*. They are also countless in number. Just as Parabrahman is one and incomparable, similarly, Aksharbrahman is also only one and incomparable. Bhagwan Swaminarayan has explained this fact in the Vachanāmrut and the *Vedras*. "There are many who have attained divinity similar to that of Akshar. But there is only one Akshar" (*Vedras,* p.213-4).

Gunatitanand Swami also reiterates the same point, "There is only one Akshar – God's abode. The rest are *akshar muktas* and their number is infinite" (Swāmini Vāto 5.177).

In the *Setumālā* commentary on the *Harivākyasudhāsindhu* by Acharya Shri Raghuvirji Maharaj, the same principle is restated, "God in his abode is served as he wishes by the personal Aksharbrahman – and by infinite *muktas*, who have attained rapport with Aksharbrahman" (*Setumālā,* 59.5).

Here, it is mentioned that there are infinite *akshar muktas*, but only one Aksharbrahman. The singular case is used for Aksharbrahman at many places in the Vachanāmrut and the *Vedras*. For example, "Akshar is like this (*Akshar te āvo chhe*), and the bliss associated with him is like this" (Vachanāmrut, Loyā 17).

"Akshardhām (*evo je Aksharrup Dhām*) is the greatest of the great" (*Vedras,* p.146).

It is therefore clear that Aksharbrahman is one and incomparable. Shriji Maharaj has also said that the one and incomparable Akshar is *anādi* – eternal. The other *akshar muktas* have reached that stage only through the association of eternal Akshar.

"That Aksharbrahman – in the form of the abode of God – is eternal in comparison to all the other *aksharbrahmans* [referring to *akshar muktas*]" (Vachanāmrut, Ahmedābād 6).

6.9 Relationship Between Akshar and Purushottam

Akshar and Purushottam have a special relationship as *sharir-shariri* and *sevak*-Swami.

Shriji Maharaj says, "Wherever that form of Purushottam resides, that is the very centre of Akshardhām" (Vachanāmrut, Gadhadā II 42). Furthermore, "The form in which there is not even a trace of the influence of Prakruti-Purush, etc., and in which only Purushottam Bhagwan resides – that should be known as the *vyatirek* form of Akshar" (Vachanāmrut, Sārangpur 5) .

Akshar and Purushottam thus have a special relationship with each other.

Aksharbrahman – as the dearest, nearest, ideal and best *sevak* and devotee – is always with Parabrahman in his divine abode, and accompanies him in any universe where he desires to manifest (Vachanāmruts, Gadhadā I 71, Gadhadā II 42). Precisely for this reason, Aksharbrahman is a separate entity from Parabrahman Purushottam, yet they remain eternally bound together. That is to say, Aksharbrahman is associated with Parabrahman through the special bond of *Swami-sevakbhāv*. It is impossible to

imagine Aksharbrahman to be aloof or separate from Parabrahman.

Thus Aksharbrahman and Parabrahman have a special relationship. Aksharbrahman cannot be even thought of without Parabrahman. Also, without Brahman, one has no right to offer worship to Parabrahman.

Akshar is the lord of all; but is the servant of Purushottam. Except for Parabrahman, no entity can rule over Aksharbrahman.

"Purushottam Bhagwan…is the inspirer of both the *ātmā* and Akshar, is independent from them and is their controller. He also possesses all spiritual powers. He is greater than even Akshar, which is greater than everything" (Vachanāmrut, Gadhadā I 64).

Thus Parabrahman Purushottam Nārāyan is the support, cause and inspirer of Brahman.

The powers of Purushottam Bhagwan are explained in Vachanāmrut, Loyā 13, "If he wishes, he can eclipse all of the *muktas* of Akshardhām by his own divine light and prevail alone. Also, if he wishes, he can accept the bhakti of the *muktas* and reside with them. He can eclipse even Akshar – in the form of the Akshardhām in which he dwells – and preside alone independently. If he so chooses, he is capable of supporting the countless *muktas* by his own power, without even needing Akshardhām."

It is clear that Purushottam is totally independent. He is not dependent on Akshar, whereas, Akshar is dependent on Purushottam.

Purushottam has the supreme powers to merge Akshardhām. At the time of *ātyantik pralay* (final rest), the *jivas* and *ishwars* merge into *māyā*. *Māyā* merges in Brahman. But there is no mention of Brahman merging into Parabrahman. It is mentioned that, "With the exception of God's Akshardhām, the form of God in that Akshardhām and his devotees in that Akshardhām, everything else…is perishable" (Vachanāmrut, Gadhadā II 24).

In other words, after the final rest, *Dhām* (Akshardhām), *Dhāmi* (Purushottam) and the *muktas* are the only three entities that remain.

6.10 What is Meant by Brahman Merging into Parabrahman?

It is mentioned in the Vachanāmrut that Brahman merges into Parabrahman. What exactly is meant by this reference? Here, merging of Brahman into Parabrahman means that the powers of Brahman are suppressed and the influence of Parabrahman predominantly prevails. The powers of Brahman are suppressed in the superior powers and glory of Parabrahman, but there is no merging of Aksharbrahman's form.

Shriji Maharaj has clarified in the Vachanāmrut "In this manner, in whomever that Purushottam Bhagwan 'enters' for the purpose of fulfilling many types of tasks, he eclipses that entity by his own divine light and he himself reigns supreme through that entity. Moreover, in whomever he resides, he suppresses their own light and manifests his own divine light – just as when fire enters iron, it suppresses the quality of coldness and the black colour of the iron and exhibits its own quality. Also, when the sun rises, the light from all of the stars, the moon, etc., merges into its own light, and only the sun's light remains. In the same way, in whomever God 'enters', he overpowers their

light and exhibits his own divine light to a greater degree" (Vachanāmrut, Panchālā 7).

Lakshman, the son of Viro Sheladiyā of Samadhiyālā, was lost in the meditation of Gunatitanand Swami and became one with him. At that time, he saw Shriji Maharaj in place of Gunatitanand Swami. He thus had the vision of Brahman merging into Parabrahman.

6.11 Divine Qualities of Aksharbrahman

For all practical purposes, Brahman and Parabrahman are different, "Transcending that Brahman is Parabrahman, Purushottam Nārāyan, who is distinct from Brahman, and is the cause, the supporter and the inspirer of Brahman" (Vachanāmrut, Gadhadā II 3). However, by the wish of Parabrahman, Aksharbrahman has special qualities compared to *jivas* and *ishwars*.

In the way Purushottam transcends *māyā*, so does Akshar. Purushottam is personal; similarly, Akshar is also personal. Whatever is touched by Purushottam becomes *brahmarup* – even *māyā* becomes *nirgun*; Aksharbrahman also shares the same quality. Akshar is also like Purushottam – aloof, unaffected by *māyā*, one and incomparable. Like Purushottam Nārāyan, Akshar is also not directly involved with the process of creation.

To liberate infinite *jivas* wherever Purushottam manifests in human form, Aksharbrahman also accompanies him in human form. In a kingdom, 'the queen's authority is equal to that of the king.' Similarly, Aksharbrahman has as much power and glory as Purushottam. Just as Purushottam can liberate infinite *jivas*, Aksharbrahman can also similarly liberate infinite *jivas*. But one must not forget that all the glory and powers of Aksharbrahman are bestowed upon Akshar by Purushottam.

6.12 Akshar-Purushottam Upāsanā

The Akshar-Purushottam *upāsanā* is not the *upāsanā* of two separate entities, Akshar and Purushottam. However, it means to become *aksharrup* and worship Purushottam; that is, to become *brahmarup* and offer *upāsanā* to Parabrahman.

The principle meaning of *upāsanā* is to understand Parabrahman as the all-doer, supreme, with a form and manifest, as clearly explained by Shriji Maharaj in Vachanāmruts, Panchālā 7, Gadhadā I 40, Gadhadā III 35 and others.

The powers of Aksharbrahman and the other entities are entirely dependent on Parabrahman Paramātmā, and so, clearly, there is no question of offering *upāsanā* to them.

After the manifest form of Parabrahman returns to his divine abode, the *mumukshu* who associates with the manifest guru still offers *upāsanā* to Parabrahman only. Since, Paramātmā himself is fully present through the form of the manifest *brahma-swarup* guru.

6.13 Glory of Equal Service and Bhakti to Akshar and Purushottam

By consecrating the *murtis* of Nar-Nārāyan, Lakshmi-Nārāyan, Radha-Krishna and others Bhagwan Swaminarayan advocated the equal service of *Bhakta*-Bhagwan, i.e.,

God and his choicest devotee.

Commenting on verse 11 of the Shikshāpatri, Sadguru Shatanand Muni has written, "In a mandir where only the *murti* of Shri Krishna has been consecrated, a devotee should deeply feel that Shri Krishna is there with Radha and other attendants."[25]

Following this principle, a devotee should feel that where only the *murti* of Shri Harikrishna Maharaj (Sahajanand Swami) has been consecrated, Shri Harikrishna Maharaj's ideal devotee, Aksharbrahman Gunatitanand Swami, is also present.

In the Vachanāmrut, replying to Nityanand Swami's question, Bhawan Swaminarayan describes this as the best way to eradicate the drawbacks of 100 lives in one life: "Nityanand Swami asked, 'Can a devotee who is of the lowest level eradicate his deficiency and become a devotee of the highest level in this very life, or not?'

"Shriji Mahārāj replied, 'Just as one performs the *mānsi* puja of God, if one also performs the *mānsi* puja of the ideal Bhakta along with God, by offering him the *prasād* of God; and just as one prepares a *thāl* for God, similarly, if one also prepares a *thāl* for God's ideal Bhakta and serves it to him; and just as one donates five rupees to God, similarly, if one also donates money to the great Sant – then by performing with extreme affection such similar service of God and the Sant who possesses the highest qualities, even if he is a devotee of the lowest type and was destined to become a devotee of the highest type after two lives, or after four lives, or after ten lives, or after a hundred lives, he will become a devotee of the highest calibre in this very life. Such are the fruits of the similar service of God and God's Bhakta.' "

This answers the frequently ask question: since Sadguru Gunatitanand Swami, Sadguru Gopalanand Swami were sadhus is it appropriate to adorn their *murtis* with rich garments, crowns and ornaments? The answer is that Shriji Maharaj has shown equal service as the best means to eradicate the drawbacks of 100 lives in one life. Further details are presented in the Appendix, p. 180.

The inference is therefore very clear that Shastriji Maharaj did not concoct a new theory of Swami and Nārāyan, i.e., of Akshar and Purushottam. He has only lucidly explained the core of Shriji Maharaj's principle in the Sampradaya and thus opened the doors to liberation for infinite *jivas*.

Shastriji Maharaj often used to give the following anecdote: As devotees, we should not follow the example of Ravan or Shurpankha; but should follow the example of Vibhishan. Ravan had affection for Sita, but anger for Rama. As a result he was beheaded. Similarly if one is affectionate towards the ideal, Gunātit, devotee but nurses a grudge against God, i.e., Shriji Maharaj, he loses his head. Shurpankha had love for Rama, but hated Sita. Consequently, her ears and nose were chopped off. If therefore one has love for God, but hatred for Gunātit, one's ears and nose may get cut off. Vibhishan, however, had the correct understanding of worshipping Rama, Lakshman, Sita and Hanuman. Similarly, we should also have the same degree of love for and never malign the ideal devotee – *Dhām*, God – *Dhāmi*, and the *akshar muktas*.

6.13 Gunatitanand Swami Is Mul Akshar: How?

Explaining his manifestation to the *paramhansas*, Shriji Maharaj said, "My present

objective is to annihilate ignorance and make the *jivas* attain the state of *brahmarup*." To eradicate the *jivas*' age-old bondage to *māyā*, to make them *brahmarup* and to help them to understand the knowledge of Parabrahman, Shriji Maharaj brought Aksharbrahman with him on this earth.

These words are echoed in a kirtan *("Dharmane lāle mune...")* composed by Sadguru Premanand Swami:

Mul māyānā bandhan kāpavā āvyā,
Dhāmdhāmnā vāsi ādi bolāvyā rāj...
Dharmane...
Mul Akshar pan Shri Hari sange,
Mukta mandalne lāvyā umange rāj...
Dharmane...

To severe the bonds of *māyā,* the inhabitants of various abodes followed him.

Mul Akshar and *akshar muktas* joyfully descended with him.

Thus it is clear from the above (and Vachānāmrut Gadhadā I 71) that Shriji Maharaj manifested on this earth with his Akshardhām. The obvious question arises as to who is that Aksharbrahman? A historical study of the Swaminarayan Sampradaya reveals that in the initial stages, it was difficult for many to accept the divine supremacy and glory of Shriji Maharaj as Parbrahman. In such circumstances, how could they have had any idea – let alone a clear understanding – of the concept of Aksharbrahman?

Shriji Maharaj occasionally disclosed to those followers and *paramhansas* who had innate faith in him that his divine abode was none else but Gunatitanand Swami. As well as this, as mentioned earlier, Shriji Maharaj also narrated the glory and greatness of Aksharbrahman in the shastras. In addition to that, we shall also examine the evidence and incidents recorded by the *paramhansas* revealing Gunatitanand Swami as Aksharbrahman.

6.13.1 Gunatitanand Swami Is Akshar: Scriptural Evidence

In Samvat Year 1866 (1810 CE) on the full moon day of the month of Posh, Mulji Sharma of Bhadra was initiated ceremoniously into the sadhufold by Shriji Maharaj in Dabhān on the last day of the grand *yagna* held there. He was renamed Gunatitanand Swami. Shriji Maharaj at that time revealed Mulji Sharma's greatness. This description has been recorded by Acharya Shri Raghuvirji Maharaj in the following words:

Mulji Sharmane dikshām dadānasya prajāyate,
Bhuyānme'tra samānando yato Dhām-āksharam sa me.
Muktāiranantaihi sākam me yatrā'khandatayoshyate,
Urdhvādhobhāgarahitam tanmulam Dhāma chāksharam.

Today, I am extremely happy to initiate Mulji Sharma (who was born in Bhadra). He is my divine abode – Akshardhām, which is infinite and endless. With infinite *muktas,* I forever reside in my *Dhām*.

- Shri Harililākalpataru 7.17.49-50

It is also written in Purushottam Charitra.[26]

Vandu Gunatitanand Swami,
jehi par rijhe Antaryāmi;
Bhagvad-vārtā satata karahi,
dhyān Dharmānandanko dharahi.
Uttamkulmā dhari avatar,
Shri Hari kāj tajyo sansār;
Rakhe dharma puni dharma rakhāve,
ādi hi Akshar āp kahāve.

I bow to Gunatitanand Swami with whom the *Antaryāmi* (God) is extremely pleased.

Uninterrupted, he (Gunatitanand Swami) is engaged in spiritual discourses,

And meditates on Shriji Maharaj – the son of Dharma.

Born in a noble family, he renounced the world for God.

He treads on the straight and narrow religious path,

And guides others onto the same path. He is renowned as Mul Akshar.

Acharya Shri Viharilalji Maharaj has written in his collection of kirtans, *Kirtan Kaustubhamālā* (p.13):

Aksharmurti Gunatitanand Swami, tene āpyā vartmān
Pote pāline pachhi palāvya, janane dai ghanu jnān;
Āvoji Avatāri, ānandkāri, pritam jivanpran.

Aksharmurti Gunatitanand Swami initiated and guided me to practice the religious vows.

He followed them and then inspired others to follow them through giving immense knowledge to people.

We heartily welcome you, the divine incarnation, the dispenser of joy and the most beloved.

Brahmachari Krishnanandji has written:

Dhām Dhāmi ja sāthe padhāryā, Swami ne Maharaj,
Ekāntik dharma sthāpvā bani, alaukik jodi āj re,
Avo he Avināshi, sukhnā rāshi, Aksharnā ādhār...
Dayālu tame dayā kari lāvyā, Mul Aksharne sāth,
Gunatitanand nām chhe jenu, pādyu chhe pote ho Nāth re,
Āvo he Avināshi, sukhnā rāshi, Aksharnā ādhār...

To establish *Ekāntik Dharma*, the unique pair of *Dhām* and *Dhāmi,* Swami and Maharaj, descended together.

We welcome you, O eternal, full of joy, the supporter of Akshar.

O Merciful, compassionate, as you are, you brought along with you Mul Akshar.

And you gave him the name – Gunatitanand.

We welcome you, O eternal, full of joy, the supporter of Akshar.

Similar references are also found in the kirtans of Jeram Brahmachari, Akhandanand Brahmachari and Jagdishanand Brahmachari of Junagadh.

6.13.2 Gunatitanand Swami Is Akshar: In the Words of Shriji Maharaj

1. In Samvat Year 1864 (1808 CE), Shriji Maharaj visited Bhadra. He was invited to

Mulji Bhakta's house for lunch. On that occasion, Shriji Maharaj revealed Gunatitanand Swami as Mul Akshar for the first time. He told Sakarba – Gunatitanand Swami's mother, "Mother, you may not understand, but your son (Mulji) is my divine abode Akshardhām in person. He is bound with me and I am bound to him. Our bond is unbreakable." Shriji Maharaj also talked at length with the devotees who had gathered there of the glory of Mulji Bhakta as Aksharbrahman.[27]

2. During the Janmashtmi festival in Junagadh in Samvat Year 1905 (1849 CE), Sadguru Gopalanand Swami requested the devotees from Bhadra to recollect what Shriji Maharaj had told them about Mulji Bhakta. The incident above gained wider publicity.

3. In Samvat Year 1868 (1812 CE), Holi, the festival of colours, was celebrated in Sarangpur at Rathod Dhadhal's place. At that time, Shriji Maharaj sung Kabir's poem on Holi:

Jogiyā tālat janam kerā fāsalā re,
Premnā pyālā jogiyā, jug jug jivo so jogiya..
Koti Krishna jode hāth, koti Vishnu name māth,
Koti Shankar dhare dhyān, koti Brahmā kathe jnān;
Sadguru khele Vasant...

The noose of the cycle of births is removed by the God-realized Sadhus.

They are the cup of love. May they live for all time.

Before him [the Sadguru] stand millions of Krishnas with folded hands; As well as millions of Vishnus with bowed heads.

Millions of Shivas meditate on him;

Millions of Brahmās speak of his glory.

That Sadguru is engaged in the divine play of Spring.

Shriji Maharaj then asked. "Who is that Sadguru?"

Earlier in Loj and Mangrol, Maharaj himself had said, "I am that Sadguru." The sadhus therefore replied, "Maharaj, you are that Sadguru."

Shriji Maharaj touched his stick on Gunatitanand Swami's chest and declared, "I am the supreme Purushottam Nārāyan. That Sadguru is none other than Gunatitanand Swami whose glory and greatness have been described in this poem. Gunatitanand Swami, in the form of the divine abode, is the dwelling place for me and infinite *muktas*. In his personal *sākār* form, he serves me in Akshardhām as well as on earth. He has manifested with me as a sadguru to propagate the supreme *upāsanā*."[28]

4. In Vartal, Gunatitanand Swami was returning from Lake Gomti after washing the quilts of the ill sadhus. Shriji Maharaj was returning following his meal at Vasan Suthar's house. They crossed each other at Hanuman Gate. By the force of Swami's concentration, Shriji Maharaj had to stop on the spot. The heavy weight of 18 quilts had made Gunatitanand Swami sweat profusely. Shriji Maharaj also began to perspire. After a while, asking for Swami's leave, Shriji Maharaj asked, "Sadhuram, may I go

now?"

Swami replied, "Maharaj, of course you may leave."

Entering the assembly, Shriji Maharaj said, "I am perspiring because I feel I am carrying a heavy load." Thus Bhaguji and Bapu Ratanji started to fan Maharaj. Shriji Maharaj then pointed out, "To reduce the load, take the quilts off that sadhu's shoulders." Bhaguji removed all the quilts from Swami's shoulders. Shriji Maharaj then called for Muktanand Swami, Brahmanand Swami and other sadhus and said, "Just as a snake is held by pincers, this sadhu firmly holds my *murti* in all three states [i.e., he constantly beholds me]. He is my dwelling place – Akshardhām – in person. He is the best of all and worthy of spiritual association even for the most exalted."[29]

5. When Gunatitanand Swami was appointed as Mahant of Junagadh Mandir, Shriji Maharaj garlanded him and presented him with his own entire dress. He placed his *pāgh* on Swami's head with his hands and blessed him.[30] At that time, Kurji Dave of Akha was present in the assembly. Shriji Maharaj reminded him, "Many years ago, you brought the happy news that Ramanand Swami had arrived from Bhuj. The devotees gave you various gifts. I had told you at that time, 'I will give you my Akshardhām as a gift.' You did not quite understand it. But today I give to you the gift of my very Akshardhām – Gunatitanand Swami – to the devotees in Sorath. I have been unable to live here in this Sorath region for long. I therefore offer this sadhu to you. He is my all."

6. Samvat Year 1884 (1828 CE) was a particularly cold year. A heated iron grate was placed besides Gunatitanand Swami and he was warming himself. Soon Swami was feeling the heat. Exactly at that time in Gadhada, Shriji Maharaj said, "I am feeling very hot, I want to take a bath. Please bring some cold water." Everyone was surprised. Muktanand Swami asked for a reason. Shriji Maharaj replied, "I was feeling hot because my Akshardhām was feeling hot."

Muktanand Swami countered, "Maharaj, Akshardhām is cool and calm. How can it become hot?"

Shriji Maharaj replied, "My Akshardhām incarnate – Gunatitanand Swami – while warming himself felt hot due to the excessive heat in the grate. Consequently, I also felt hot."

7. While taking a bath at the River Ghela in Gadhada, Gunatitanand Swami's foot became stuck in a rock crevice. Despite much effort, he could not pull it out. Shriji Maharaj appeared before him and asked him to slowly draw out his foot. At the same time, Shriji Maharaj was asking in his room in Gadhada, "Pull out my foot; otherwise it may break."

Mulji Brahmachari questioned, "Maharaj, you are sitting on a cot; how can your foot possibly suffer a fracture?"

Shriji Maharaj replied with a smile, "My abode Gunatitanand Swami's foot was trapped in a crevice in the fast running water. Only with great effort was it freed."

8. When Shriji Maharaj had made up his mind to return to his abode, he advised those sadhus and devotees who were emotionally attached to him and were likely to be affected by the separation, to go on a pilgrimage of Gujarat. Gopalanand Swami submitted at that time, "Maharaj, Gunatitanand Swami, the Mahant of Junagadh has come here. He is very much attached to you and is unlikely to bear your separation. Ask him to return to Junagadh."

Shriji Maharaj listened. He then replied, "Swami, Gunatitanand Swami is my *gunātit* Akshardhām. How can I possibly send him away? Wherever he is, I am there. And wherever I am, he is also there. How can he ever be separated from me?"

9. Once in Panchala, Gunatitanand Swami had sat down to eat with the *paramhansas* – Muktanand Swami on one side and Bhai Atmanand Swami on the other. Shriji Maharaj came and said to Kalyanbhai of Vanthali, "Look! A goat squeezed between two tigers." Smiling, he pointed his finger to Gunatitanand Swami and said, "Kalyanbhai, do you know this Sadhu? He is my Akshar-dhām. Make it a point to recognize him thoroughly."

6.13.3 Gunatitanand Swami's Unique Glory: As Described by Shriji Maharaj

Only God fully knows and can explain the glory of his greatest devotee. We have seen earlier that Shriji Maharaj has clearly identified his choicest devotee Gunatitanand Swami as the incarnation of Aksharbrahman. In addition to this, he has also explained on many occasions the unique glory of his ideal and eternal servant.

1. In Samvat Year 1877 (1821 CE) in Panchala, Shriji Maharaj taught the *paramhansas* how to apply the *tilak* on their foreheads. Shriji Maharaj first of all applied the *tilak* on Gunatitanand Swami's forehead and announced, "Please look at my *tilak*. There is no Sadhu like him; there is no God like me."

2. To ensure that the sadhus observed the religious vows faithfully, Shriji Maharaj asked them to arrange mutual sureties. Exactly at that time, Gunatitanand Swami arrived from Junagadh. However, there was no sadhu left to stand as Swami's surety. Brahmanand Swami asked, "Maharaj, who will stand as a surety for Gunatitanand Swami?"

Shriji Maharaj replied, "I am his surety forever."

3. Gunatitanand Swami had come to Gadhada for Shriji Maharaj's darshan. Shukanand Swami started searching for a mat for Gunatitanand Swami to sit on. Shriji Maharaj pointed out to Shukanand Swami, "His greatness is not due to the mat. His greatness is eternal."

4. Once Muktanand Swami, Brahmanand Swami, Nityanand Swami, Anand Swami, Gunatitanand Swami and other sadhus, totalling about 18, were seated in a group while Shriji Maharaj served them food. Shriji Maharaj then asked the sadhus, "All of

you should learn how to eat from Gunatitanand Swami."

With tongue in cheek, Brahmanand Swami retorted, "The sadhu eats very well."

Shriji Maharaj immediately corrected him. "I do not mean what you say. Because that sadhu enjoys the taste of my *murti*. Just as grains are poured in a storage bin, similarly, he fills his stomach with food. He lives suppressing his immense greatness and powers; otherwise crowds of people would follow him in the same way they follow me."

Agreeing, Brahmanand Swami said, "Maharaj, you are quite right. He is indeed a very great sadhu."

5. When Gunatitanand Swami was appointed as the Head of Junagadh Mandir, Shriji Maharaj mentioned, "Those who go with Swami to Junagadh will be cleansed of all sins in this very birth, which otherwise would take ten million births to be purified."

6. In Samvat Year 1884 (1828 CE), the *murtis* were consecrated in the Junagadh Mandir by Shriji Maharaj. When he was about to leave, the Nawab of Junagadh, Hamadkhanji, requested, "Maharaj, please stay here permanently."

Shriji Maharaj replied, "I am not in a position to live here. But I shall place a sadhu like myself (*Ham nahi to ham jaisā rakhenge*)." With these words, he pointed to Gunatitanand Swami who had been appointed the Mahant of Junagadh.

7. At the *murti-pratishthā* ceremony of the Junagadh Mandir, Shriji Maharaj instructed all the sadhus to stay one month every year in Junagadh in Gunatitanand Swami's company.

Vali santne āpi āganyā re, re'vu nahi āhi āvyā vinā re;
Varaso varas ek mās re, karavo ā mandir māhi vās re.

[Shriji Maharaj] instructed that the sadhus should invariably come here [Junagadh Mandir];

For one month every year, they should stay in this mandir.

- Nishkulānand Kāvya, Purushottam Prakāsh 32

This order was to be strictly observed by all the sadhus in the Sampradaya. Reading between the lines of this specific order, one can understand the need for associating with Gunatitanand Swami to grasp the supreme *upāsanā* of Shriji Maharaj and to realize his glory, because only in the company of Akshar can one attain the state of *aksharrup,* and realize the glory and powers of Purushottam. Honouring this order, Sadguru Gopalanand Swami visited Junagadh every year. If during a particular year, he was unable to go to Junagadh, he would make up the following year by staying for two months.

Some people believed that because the mandir in Junagadh was somewhat isolated, and that Gunatitanand Swami was unlearned, Shriji Maharaj had issued the order to give him the benefit of living with the sadhus. But Aksharbrahman has no need to learn worldly knowledge. Even the Vedas refer to him as "*Neti! Neti!*" (Not this! Not this!).

Furthermore, anyone who reads and studies Gunatitanand Swami's talks would be more than convinced that Swami himself was an inspiring source of *brahmavidyā.* Therefore all the sadhus in the Sampradaya felt the need to associate with him. In the regular discourses of the sadhus, Swāmini Vāto have a pride of place and the sadhus cite them as eternal truth.

8. When Shriji Maharaj decided to return to his divine abode, he called for Gunatitanand Swami from Junagadh. Meeting him alone, Shriji Maharaj said:

Mithā Vhālā kem visaru, māru tamathi bāndhel tan ho,
Tarasyāne jem pānidu vhālu, bhukhyāne bhojan ho...

My dearest one, how can I forget you. I am inseparably bound to you.
Like a thirsty person's love for water, and hungry person's love for food...
Swami also echoed the same feelings.

6.13.4 Gunatitanand Swami Is Akshar: In the Words of Gunatitanand Swami

Brahman and Parabrahman transcend *māyā*, and are incomprehensible through the *māyik indriyas* and *antahkarans*. They can be realized only, if out of sheer compassion, they reveal their forms. Compassionately, Gunatitanand Swami occasionally revealed himself as Aksharbrahman to those sadhus and devotees who had deep faith in his words.

1. Gopalanand Swami identified Gunatitanand Swami as Akshar to the Hindustani Sadhu Keshavjivandas, and asked him to go to Junagadh to have the benefit of Swami's company. While in Junagadh, Keshavjivandas heard different accounts about Akshar and was rather confused. Therefore he asked Gunatitanand Swami plainly, "Swami, Gopalanand Swami has explained to me that you are Akshar. Pragji Bhakta and Jaga Bhakta also call you Akshar. But someone calls Brahmamuni [Brahmanand Swami] Akshar, and others call Mulji Brahmachari Akshar. What is the truth? Swami, I have abiding faith in you. Kindly explain to me as it is."

Gunatitanand Swami quietly told him, "You have faith in me. You believe me as Akshar. I alone am Akshar personified. If someone else claims to be Akshar, that's between him and me." On hearing these words of Gunatitanand Swami, Keshavjivandas was fully convinced of Swami's glory as Aksharbrahman and began propagating it to others.

As Gunatitanand Swami's popularity was increasing rapidly, a few sadhus were becoming envious. Someone therefore warned Keshavjivandas, "You know Swami is Akshar, but do not say so here in Vartal. If you will say it, you will be compelled to put on white clothes." But Keshavjivandas had unflinching faith in Swami's words and knew Swami as Aksharbrahman. Undeterred, he replied, "I shall say it, say it and say it! Even if I am made to wear black clothes, I shall still say that Swami is Akshar. *(Kahungā, kahungā, kahungā! Kālā paherke bhi Swami ko* Akshar *kahungā*)."

Then Acharya Bhagvatprasadji Maharaj had him discard his saffron clothes and put on white clothes. Despite this humiliation, he continued to propagate Swami's glory as

Aksharbrahman.

2. In Samvat Year 1923 (1867 CE), Gunatitanand Swami was to attend the full moon day festival of the month of Chaitra in Vartal. Pavitranand Swami and others had planned in advance not to receive Swami on the outskirts of Vartal. However, when Gunatitanand Swami was about to arrive, most of the devotees from the assembly went to receive him. After Swami's arrival, there was a great rush for his darshan resulting in pandemonium. As planned, Gopaljidada (Acharya Raghuvirji Maharaj's elder brother) was to reprimand Swami. All of a sudden, he shouted, "All of you are showmen rushing around like this; Swami also wants to become God and therefore does not utter one word."

Immediately Swami stood up in the assembly and at the top of his voice boldly said, "Please do not call me God. Only Sahajanand Swami – the most supreme, and the ultimate cause of all causes – is God; no one else. However, speaking before you today in this assembly is Mul Akshar – as mentioned in the shastras. Know him as such."

Unhesitatingly and undeterred, in a highly surcharged situation, Swami clarified that he was Aksharbrahman. All were left speechless.

3. To eradicate the ignorance of the causal body, Vagha Khachar of Sarangpur had gone to Junagadh. Gunatitanand Swami had asked him to come to Junagadh and stay in his company. On his way to Junagadh, Bhagatji Maharaj told him that Swami was Mul Akshar. Vagha Khachar, however, could not accept this. Once in Junagadh, the devotees were clearing the ground of the mandir farm by removing stones and pebbles. All of them appeared extremely elated. Vagha Khachar thereupon asked Dama Sheth of Mahuva, "Why do I not experience the joy which all of those devotees seem to be enjoying?"

Dama Sheth replied, "Have faith in Pragji Bhakta's words and know Swami as Mul Akshar; then you too will experience the same joy."

Vagha Khachar replied, "Only if Swami himself says so, will I accept this."

In a short while, Gunatitanand Swami came there, attracted by Pragji Bhakta's intense concentration. Vagha Khachar asked him, "Swami, Pragji says you are Mul Akshar personified. Please make it clear to me."

Gunatitanand Swami replied, "What Pragji says is a fact."

With utter surprise, Vagha Khachar asked again, "Swami, are you Akshar in person?"

Gunatitanand Swami replied in the affirmative. Vagha Khachar was instantly convinced that Gunatitanand Swami was Mul Akshar and felt the removal of all the sensual cravings and experienced immense joy.

4. Once Naja Kamali attended the Janmashtmi festival in Junagadh. In the assembly, he asked Gunatitanand Swami, "Swami, we know Maharaj as the ultimate avatar of all *avatāris*, and Gopalanand Swami as the highest *mukta*. But how can we know and realize the personal form of Akshar?"

Gunatitanand Swami replied, “He, who is at the moment sitting with you and talking with you, is none other than Akshar himself.”

5. Revealing his identity to the devotees of Mahuva, Gunatitanand Swami said, “At the moment, Akshar is picking pebbles and is making leaf-cups with you.”

6. Following his final departure from Junagadh, Gunatitanand Swami came to Vanthali. At that time, Kalyanbhai’s son, Devji-bhai, offered puja. He then asked, “Swami, all of us are talking about Akshar. What is that Akshar like?”

Swami replied, “That very Akshar is sitting in your house.”

6.13.5 Gunatitanand Swami Is Akshar: As Revealed In Swāmini Vāto

1. “There is nothing more to understand and this is all that needs to be understood: Know Maharaj as Purushottam (the supreme God) and this Sadhu as Akshar. All these are *akshar* [*muktas*], but he [referring to himself] is Mul Akshar – and he also has assumed a human body presently” (Swāmini Vāto 3.38).

2. “In the village of Devrajiya, Swami said, ‘The one whom we wanted to attain after leaving this body, the one whom we wanted to meet – that God we have met. That God and that Sadhu we wanted to attain after shedding this body, that [very same] God and Sadhu are the ones we have met.’ Then Swami banged his hand on the seat and said, ‘And this Sadhu is the abode of God…’” (Swāmini Vāto 4.58).

3. “A devotee asked, ‘Why can’t the *ātmā* be seen?’

“Swami replied, ‘It is seen, but not believed. After acquiring knowledge, it will be believed that, ‘This is Brahman and the departed is Parabrahman.’ Thus Swami spoke words of essence” (Swāmini Vāto 6.208).

4. “Akshardhām is very far, but for our sake God has brought it near. He is seated here in human form” (Swāmini Vāto 4.61).

5. “This sadhu is Akshar. His divine and human traits should be taken in the same regard. He is unborn and has never been bound in the womb. His ways are like a magician’s feats. As willed by Maharaj, he appears before you” (Swāmini Vāto 5.183).

6.13.6 Gunatitanand Swami’s Unique Glory: As Described in Swāmini Vāto

1. “In the village of Pithvajal, Swami said, ‘Someone may ask what Akshardham is like. Well, we have seen God, seen those who live in Akshardham, seen the servants of God, seen those who live near God and have talked to them. Now, the only thing left is that we cannot see the divine light of Akshardham. And God resides in this Sadhu; therefore keep trust in him’ ” (Swāmini Vāto 4.66).

2. “This sadhu constantly remains in the presence of God. He is not likely to remain

distant for even a moment. But he has stayed here, away from God, for the liberation of the *jivas*. At present, people say that such talks cannot be given by another sadhu in his lifetime, since he would not even know how to do it. And even if he studied for an entire lifetime, such talks cannot be learnt" (Swāmini Vāto 5.20).

3. "Today, those who have taken birth in human form have one foot in Akshardham, and those who have recognized this Sadhu have both feet in Akshardham" (Swāmini Vāto 3.26).

4. "The form of God that is in Akshardham and the one which you see [Bhagwan Swaminarayan] are identical. The only difference is that the former shows more light. The only deficiency is in not understanding this *murti* – which one is seeing – to be the same as the *murti* in Akshardham. Therefore, understand divine traits and human traits to be one and the same, and everything will be achieved. All other things will be automatically understood afterwards" (Swāmini Vāto 5.255).

5. "In Vartal, Swami said, 'There is no need to do anything else. Become his devotee and surrender the *jiva* to him. By this, everything is being done. In Akshardham, Maharaj is seated like this facing north.' After saying this, he demonstrated by pointing his finger from the toe on his foot to the crown of his head" (Swāmini Vāto 4.89).

6. "This sadhu is a 'foreigner' [i.e., not belonging to this universe]. With the *pragat* form of Maharaj, this sadhu can be seen. Otherwise, this sadhu is not to be found anywhere else" (Swāmini Vātos 4.70, 4.51).

6.13.7 Gunatitanand Swami Is Akshar: In the Words of Gopālanand Swami

1. In Samvat Year 1906 (1850 CE), in the month of Fāgun, Sadguru Gopalanand Swami visited Nāvli. Keshavjivandas, a Hindustani sadhu, prostrated before him, and with tears in his eyes, said to him, "I belong to the Ahmedabad diocese. Yet I live with you at Vartal. Everyone therefore tells me that I will not attain liberation."

Gopalanand Swami consoled him and said, "You need not be disturbed. I shall take you to Akshardhām in your present body."

In the same year in the month of Chaitra, Gunatitanand Swami came to Vartal. Sadguru Gopalanand Swami pointing his finger to Gunatitanand Swami said to Keshavjivandas, "Do you remember my promise to take you to Akshardhām? Well, Gunatitanand Swami is the very incarnation of Shriji Maharaj's Akshardhām. Stay with him. He will explain to you the knowledge of Maharaj's supremacy. He can talk incessantly without any problems, whereas I am unable to do so."

2. Once, on the full moon day of the month of Chaitra, Gunatitanand Swami had come to Vartal. The *ācharyas* of both dioceses as well as senior *sadgurus* were present at the festival. In the assembly, Gopalanand Swami was seated on the platform. Next to him were seated Nityanand Swami, Shukanand Swami and Gunatitanand Swami.

At that time Gopalanand Swami said to Mālji Soni of Bhoykā, who had a high regard for him, "Hadn't I told you that I would show you Akshardhām? This Gunatitanand Swami is the incarnation of Akshardhām. Maharaj has identified him as Akshardhām. Make sure you recognize him thoroughly."

Shastriji Maharaj himself visited Bhoykā to verify the truth of this traditional account that had gained popularity by oral transmission. He heard it from Mālji Soni himself. Subsequently Yogiji Maharaj and other devotees also went to Bhoykā and heard the complete account from Mālji Soni.[31]

3. Once Jhinābhai Rāthod and Pragji Bhakta of Mahuva along with Jaga Bhakta decided together to ask a question to Gopalanand Swami. Pragji Bhakta asked the question, "To remain forever in close proximity with Maharaj and yourself, and to wipe away all imperfections, is it possible while staying as a householder or does one have to become a renunciant?"

Gopalanand Swami replied, "To accept Shriji Maharaj as the ultimate cause of all avatars, and this [pointing to Gunatitanand Swami] Gunatitanand Swami as the eternal Akshardhām of Shriji Maharaj; and to be thus completely dedicated to them is the only way for a householder or a renunciant to remain in close proximity with Maharaj and myself. Otherwise a devotee is far away from both."

4. In Samvat Year 1905 (1849 CE), Sadguru Gopalanand Swami had come to Junagadh for the Janmashtmi celebrations. Addressing the assembly on the following day, the ninth day of the dark half of the month of Shravan, he said, "No-one recognizes Swami as he really is. Shriji Maharaj himself has told me in private about his glory – that Gunatitanand Swami is Mul Akshar."

Thereafter he asked Dosābhai, Ratnābhai and Vashram Suthār of Bhadra to address the assembly and recount the details of Gunatitanand Swami's glory which Shriji Maharaj himself had revealed for the first time in Bhadra many years before.

5. In Samvat Year 1908 (1852 CE), before he passed away, Gopalanand Swami was very sick. At that time, Bapu Rāiji, Premanand and other devotees of Vadodarā requested him to visit Vadodarā as Gopalanand Swami previously often stayed in Vadodarā. Swami replied, "Now there can be no more looking towards Vadodarā. Now my eyes are only towards Akshardhām where Maharaj dwells, or towards Junagadh where Akshardhām personified – 'the Jogi of Junagadh' – resides."

Hearing this, Shivlāl Sheth of Botād asked, "What do you mean by 'My eyes are looking towards the Jogi of Junagadh'?"

Swami replied, "The Jogi of Junagadh – Gunatitanand Swami – is Akshardhām, the divine abode of Maharaj. Maharaj is not even an atom of a distance away from him."

6.13.8 Gunatitanand Swami's Unique Glory: As Described by Gopālanand Swami

1. Once Gopalanand Swami halted in Gadhada on his way to Junagadh. He

mentioned, “Maharaj appointed *mahants* for different mandirs but Gunatitanand Swami has proved to be the best of them. He completed the construction of Junagadh mandir despite the opposition of the Nagar community. He has also improved the financial standing of the mandir and spread the Sampradaya*’s* message all over Sorath. The sadhus in his group strictly observe all the religious tenets and the ascetics’ codes of conduct. He has pleased Acharya Raghuvirji Maharaj. Conducting round-the-clock religious discourses, he has not lost sight of Maharaj even for a second. He is incomparable in the entire Sampradaya. He is omniscient, omnipotent and the *Dhanvantar Vaidya*.”

2. Once Gopalanand Swami was staying in Junagadh. The *pārshads* were about to leave to cut grass from the hills for the mandir’s cattle. Gopalanand Swami saw them. He cautioned, “The clouds have gathered on the Bhensalā hill. There will be heavy rains. All of you will get drenched. Therefore do not go to collect the grass.” Obeying, the *pārshads* returned.

Gunatitanand Swami crossed them on the way. He said, “Thākorji likes only cow’s milk. The cows cannot be milked if they do not have green grass in their fodder. You should therefore go and collect the grass. Rest assured, the rains will be delayed.” Accordingly, the *pārshads* went on their way to cut the grass. After all of them safely returned, it began to rain heavily. Gopalanand Swami was very much surprised. But when he learned that the *pārshads* had gone on the orders of Gunatitanand Swami, he said, “Oh, this is the doing of Jogi (Gunatitanand Swami). Only he can change what I have said.”

3. In Samvat Year 1908 (1852 CE), Gopalanand Swami was terminally ill and had no desire to live any longer. At that time, Shivlāl Sheth of Botād became very distressed. Very much grieved, he asked Gopalanand Swami, “Swami, who is our support now?”

Gopalanand Swami replied, “What support do you want? If you want to be an expert in worldly affairs, go to Punjā Sheth of Sundariyānā; and if you want expertise in both worldly affairs and the path of liberation, go to Gunatitanand Swami – the Jogi of Junagadh. There is no sadhu with as much competence as him.”

4. Once Gopalanand Swami told Pragji Bhakta, “Pragji, will you go to Junagadh? Pragji! Go to Junagadh, and whatever I have promised you will be fulfilled there.”

5. When Gopalanand Swami passed away, he appeared in a dream before Jaga Bhakta. Jaga Bhakta asked him, “Swami, you are now leaving. What am I to do? Nothing happens as per my wishes.”

Swami imprinted his feet on Jaga Bhakta’s chest, embraced him and asked, “What do you wish to do?”

Jaga Bhakta replied, “I want to renounce the world and serve Gunatitanand Swami in Junagadh.”

Gopalanand Swami said, “I shall indeed be very happy if you serve Swami in

Junagadh."

6. Listening to Gopalanand Swami's talks, Brahmachari Achintyanandji, Mādhavcharandasji and other renunciants, as well as Nathu Patel, Dehā Khachar, Jethā Khachar, Manji Thakkar, Jibhai Shelat, Vāghjibhai, Karshanbhai Desāi and many other householders were attached to Gunatitanand Swami.

6.13.9 Gunatitanand Swami Is Akshar: In the Words of the Paramhansas

1. In Samvat Year 1939 (1883 CE), Ghanshyam Maharaj's *murti* was consecrated in the Swaminarayan mandir in Surat. Gunatitanand Swami's choicest disciple, Pragji Bhakta, had come to Surat on that occasion. There he met Sadhu Yagnapurushdas (Shastriji Maharaj), disciple of learned *paramhansa* Vignānanand Swami, who had been privileged to have lived with Shriji Maharaj. To convince Shastriji Maharaj that Gunatitanand Swami was Akshar, Pragji Bhakta asked Vignānanand Swami, "Swami, in your times, there were talks that Gunatitanand Swami is Mul Akshar. Kindly tell me today about those talks."

Vignānanand Swami looked around to make sure that nobody was overhearing, and whispered, "I had heard on many occasions from Maharaj himself that Swami was Mul Akshar. Gopalanand Swami also had established that fact time and time again. It is, therefore, uppermost in my heart."

At this point, young Yagnapurushdas, who was hiding under the cot of Vignānanand Swami, came forward and asked, "Why you did not tell me this before?"

Vignānanand Swami clarified, "Today, there are still many in the Satsang who are unable to recognize even Maharaj as Purushottam. Then how can they possibly accept Swami as Akshar? We therefore talk according to the absorbing capacity of the listeners. But what you have heard is completely true and accept it as such."

2. In Gadhada, Nrusinhanand Swami once asked Kunvarji Patel of Ingorālā, "Kunvarji Patel! How many *kangras* are there on this mandir in Gadhada?"

Kunvarji Patel replied, "There are many *kangras*."

Nrusinhanand Swami then explained, "If Gunatitanand Swami is not Akshardhām, then may I incur the sin of destroying as many cosmoses as there are *kangras* on this mandir. Therefore, either believe me, or go your own way."

3. Shriji Maharaj's personal attendant, Naja Jogiā, was initiated as a sadhu after Shriji Maharaj passed away. He was renamed Ghanshyamdas. Once when he was meditating, Gunatitanand Swami told him what was playing in his mind. Surprised by Swami's powers, he said, "Until now I regarded you as a subordinate ruler. But you are indeed the sovereign emperor; you really are Akshar."

6.13.10 Gunatitanand Swami's Unique Glory: As Described by the Paramhansas

1. Sadguru Shukanand Swami once said in Surat, "Gunatitanand Swami's discourses

in Junagadh have just as much impact as the discourses of Maharaj."

2. After listening to Gunatitanand Swami's talks in Junagadh, Nityanand Swami exclaimed, "Oh! Only today have I realized Swami's greatness as was described by Maharaj. How emphatically he talks. No one can possibly talk like him. For how can one talk when one's own actions belie the words. And even if someone else does talk, there would be no impact. But for Swami, his actions fully comply with his sermons. There may be some restraint in his sermons, but in his living, there is not the slightest violation of Shriji's injunctions. His benign influence has moved the whole of Sorath. As is said in the Shruti:

Yamevaisha vrinute tena labhyastasyaisha
ātmā vivrinute tanum svām.

He who is graced by God, is rightly selected by him.

- Katha Upanishad 2.1.23; Mundaka Upanishad 3.2.3

"Swami is blessed with Maharaj's infinite grace. Thus he is the form of Maharaj. In addition, through his own grace, he elevates others to his level."

3. Sadguru Brahmanand Swami said to Gunatitanand Swami in Muli, "Swami, I am returning to Dhām. But you need not be in a hurry to reach there. Please be patient. Gopalanand Swami is still here to spread the knowledge that Maharaj is Purushottam. You also have to stay here for that very purpose. We have descended from Akshardhām to spread this supreme knowledge. You may return to Dhām only after it has been fully propagated."

4. Sadguru Nishkulanand Swami has written in his kirtan:

Jevā e Sant kahiye shiromani, evā Hari sau shiramod,
Nishkulānand nihālatā, na jade e beni jod…
Anup Santne āpu upamā…

The Sadhu is the foremost. God is the best even among the foremost.
Nishkulanand says, in spite of a thorough search, it is difficult to find such a pair.[32]
The Sadhu is unique and incomparable.

5. In Vartal, Shriji Maharaj made Gunatitanand Swami sit between Sadguru Brahmanand Swami and Sadguru Muktanand Swami, and described at length his greatness and glory. The next day, Swami requested Muktanand Swami for some *prasād* (food from his eating bowl). Refusing, Muktanand Swami said, "You have cheated me for long enough [by hiding your glory]. Those days are now over. Now I shall no longer give you any *prasād*."

6. Gunatitanand Swami convinced Sadguru Bhai Atmanand Swami about Shriji Maharaj's supremacy. Swami then requested some *prasād*. But Bhai Atmanand Swami said, "No more reversal of the course. Until now, it was reversed. But today it has been set right." (Bhai Atmanand Swami was senior in age to Swami and always gave him

prasād. But after this incident, he discontinued this custom.)

7. Impressed by Gunatitanand Swami's living and inspiring precepts, Sadguru Krupanand Swami used to say, "You are worthy to be selected as a guru."

8. When Acharya Raghuvirji Maharaj requested Gunatitanand Swami to dissolve his five 'entanglements of ignorance', Swami replied, "Come to Junagadh as a pilgrim; I shall dissolve your ignorance."

Raghuvirji Maharaj promptly said, "I am not Raghuvirji if I do not come to Junagadh as a pilgrim."

Equally forcefully Swami replied, "I am not Gunātit if I do not dissolve your entanglements."

Raghuvirji Maharaj had full faith in Swami's immense powers. Accordingly, he went to Junagadh as a pilgrim and Swami dissolved all his imperfections.

9. Once, in an especially inspirational mood, Gunatitanand Swami talked quite dynamically. Raghuvirji Maharaj commented, "Swami, what you said should be thoroughly understood. Your talks can remove the defects of millions of births and help one to attain Akshardhām."

Swami immediately replied, "Maharaj, I do not think about any of the talks. It is Shriji Maharaj within who talks."

Raghuvirji Maharaj agreed, "Swami it is evident. Maharaj dwells in you and always talks through you."

10. Shriji Maharaj's personal attendant, Bapu Ratanji, came to Junagadh to listen to Gunatitanand Swami's discourses. He said to Swami, "Maharaj had described your glory and now I understand. If there is any defect in my understanding, please remove it and always help me. I can see that Maharaj personally manifests through you. Therefore kindly look after me." Saying these words to Swami, he departed.

Bapu Ratanji then said to Jaga Bhakta, who had come to see him off, "Unique preachers and eager listeners like you are only to be found in Junagadh. Shriji Maharaj often used to say, 'No sadhu is as dynamic as Gunatitanand Swami.' Many *muktas* accompanied Shriji Maharaj to this earth. But they are not as great as Akshar. Swami's greatness will be realized in the future. Therefore, always remain under Swami's obligation. But never let him feel your obligation. In Shriji Maharaj's lifetime, *Satyuga* prevailed. Even a youngster was immune to the feelings of sleep and lust. The same *Satyuga* prevails in Swami's presence. By pleasing Swami, rest assured, that you are pleasing Maharaj."

Besides this, Sadguru Anandanand Swami, Sadguru Pavitranand Swami and other *sadgurus*, and Abhesinhji Darbar of Lodhika and other devotees have narrated their personal experiences about Gunatitanand Swami's greatness as well. These are widely known throughout the Sampradaya.

6.13.11 Gunatitanand Swami Is Akshar: Other Evidences

The principle of Akshar is not new, nor an exotic idea concocted by Shastriji Maharaj out of thin air. It was prevalent from the time of Bhagwan Swaminarayan. There are many references to Akshar – and also Gunatitanand Swami being Akshar – even before Shastriji Maharaj left Vartal in 1905 CE.

1. The room where Shriji Maharaj stayed in Dada Khachar's *darbār* in Gadhada was known as 'Akshar Ordi'. It is quite significant that Shriji Maharaj's dwelling place is Akshar.

2. Shriji Maharaj was appointed as guru of the Sampradaya in Jetpur by Ramanand Swami. At the old mandir in Jetpur, there is an embossed silver *murti* of Gunatitanand Swami and Bhagwan Swaminarayan. Under Gunatitanand Swami's *murti*, the words 'Mul Akshar Murti Gunatitanand Swami' are clearly inscribed; under Bhagwan Swaminarayan's *murti*, the words 'Purna Purushottam Sahajanand Swami' are inscribed.

3. Gunatitanand Swami passed away in the old Swaminarayan mandir in Gondal in 1867 CE. This mandir was under the jurisdiction of the Vartal diocese. On a marble throne in that mandir, there are the *murtis* of Akshar and Purushottam, i.e., of Gunatitanand Swami and Shriji Maharaj.

4. In the assembly hall of Junagadh Mandir (under the jurisdiction of the Vartal diocese), there was an excellent oil-painted portrait of Gunatitanand Swami. Under it was written 'Anādi Mul Aksharmurti Shri Gunatitanand Swami'.[33]

5. In the new assembly hall in Junagadh mandir, on the spot where Gunatitanand Swami used to sit in the old hall, a marble shrine with Shriji Maharaj's footprints has been erected. The inscription on it reads: "In the old sanctified hall, Anādi Mul Akshar Murti Gunatitanand Swami sat for 40 years and delivered religious discourses." At other sanctified places such as the area next to the *sinhāsan*, the square where Swami used to bathe, the stand of the marble canopy, the circumambulation walkway and many other sacred places, the inscriptions refer to Swami as 'Mul Akshar'.

6. At various sacred places in Sorath, all the inscriptions referring to Gunatitanand Swami's name are prefixed with the words 'Anādi Mul Akshar'.

7. The mandirs of Rājkot, Gondal, Jetpur, Piplānā, Vanthali, Panchala, Dhorāji and Upletā in the region of Sorath are all under the administrative jurisdiction of the Vartal diocese. In the spired or smaller mandirs of these towns and villages, Sadguru Balmukunddasji, Sadguru Krishnacharandasji and other sadhus have consecrated the painted *murtis* of Akshar Purushottam. In all these places, Gunatitanand Swami's name is prefixed with the words 'Anādi Mul Akshar'.

8. Soon after Gunatitanand Swami passed away in 1867 CE, Monghiba, the then Queen Mother of Gondal, had a small shrine erected on the cremation spot of Gunatitanand Swami in Gondal and had the footprints of Shriji Maharaj consecrated therein. From that time onwards, i.e., long before Shastriji Maharaj constructed the mandir there, the shrine has been known in the Sampradaya as 'Akshar Deri'.

From Samvat Year 1923 (1867 CE) onwards, for 65 years the shrine and the surrounding land were under the administrative control of the old Swaminarayan mandir in Gondal. In the accounts books of those years, the expenditure incurred on the land is referred to as expenditure on 'Akshar Vadi'.

9. In the old manuscripts dictated by Shriji Maharaj, Gopalanand Swami has been identified as Krishna, Muktanand Swami as Narad, Nityanand Swami as Vyasji, Shukmuni as Shukdevji and Gunatitanand Swami as Akshar.

All these above references were made before the construction of any of the Akshar Purushottam mandirs by Shastriji Maharaj. They prove that Shastriji Maharaj did not start a new school of thought. He only propagated a principle that had already been revealed by Shriji Maharaj.

10. Shastriji Maharaj, with his very sharp intelligence, thoroughly verified the belief that Gunatitanand Swami was Akshar. He checked all the incidents described earlier as well as many more by hearing them directly from original and authentic sources.

In a letter written to devotees in Africa, Shastriji Maharaj mentioned the sources from whom he had come to know about specific incidents. He wrote, "I confidentially asked Kothari Gordhanbhai of Vartal, 'You and some others are against accepting Swami as Akshar. But Acharya Raghuvirji Maharaj regularly used to go to Junagadh to listen to the discourses of Gunatitanand Swami. What was his understanding?'

"Kothari specifically replied, 'Initially, he was not quite categorical in saying so. But after his visit [to Junagadh] in Samvat Year 1917 (1861 CE), he became one with Swami and was convinced that Swami was Akshar. This much I can say on oath.' "

Summing up, Shastriji Maharaj wrote, "I do not know how to manipulate stories to serve my personal motives. Besides, to lie is a grave sin. The Shrimad Bhāgavat proclaims, *'Nāsatyāt param pāpam'* – 'There is no greater sin than lying'. Moreover, the Earth has said, 'I can bear the burden of all sinners. But I cannot bear the burden of one who speaks the untruth.' I have no reason to lie. If you truly trust me and treat me as an honest and sincere person, then please accept the above description as authentic and have unflinching faith in the fact that 'Swami is Anādi Akshar and Shriji Maharaj is Purna Purushottam Bhagwan'."

Since it is a plain fact that 'Swami is Akshar', the principle has been propagated by the will of Shriji Maharaj.

After the propagation of Gunatitanand Swami as Akshar began, organized propaganda was started about Gopalanand Swami also being the incarnation of Akshar.[34] In some mandirs, 'Mul Akshar Murti Gopalanand Swami' was written under Gopalanand Swami's *murtis*.

Presuming that certain persons may not accept Gunatitanand Swami as Mul Akshar, nevertheless, the principle of Akshar-Purushottam still stands valid, and the principle that Shriji Maharaj should be honoured along with his ideal devotee is the logical corollary. In other words, Shastriji Maharaj's principle proves to be true.

6.13.12 Gunatitanand Swami Is Akshar: From His Life and Work

Gunatitanand Swami's life and work are far more inspiring than that of any other *paramhansas* or devotees. This is borne out by many incidents from his life, as is evident from the following points.

1. From his childhood, Swami constantly had the vision of Shriji Maharaj. At the age of four, he requested his mother to sing the songs of the sacred thread ceremony. Precisely at that moment, Shriji Maharaj's thread ceremony was being performed in Ayodhya. When Ghanshyam left home for his travels, Swami told his mother, "Mother, today the lord of the divine abode has set out on his long pilgrimage."

2. Arrogant with their half-baked knowledge of Brahman, the scholars at Mahemadabad were humbled by the saintliness of Gunatitanand Swami.

3. During the course of his whole life with his extraordinary powers, he miraculously cured many incurable diseases. Many received a new lease of life. Many were saved from daunting trials and tribulations. Many were sent into trance to have the vision of Akshardhām.

4. Valera Varu of Mansa, Munja Suru of Lilakha, Darbar Dajibhai of Kamrod were weaned away from the path of unrighteousness and became devotees with Swami's inspiration.

5. Swami ensured strict observance of the vows regarding the renouncing of women and wealth by the sadhus under his jurisdiction. Even the householders religiously honoured the *panch vartmāns* and were totally uninterested in sensual pleasures. Living an ideal life, his devotees were ready to lay down everything for the sake of the Satsang.

6. With Swami's association, Acharya Shri Raghuvirji Maharaj and many sadhus and householders came to realize that Gunatitanand Swami was Akshar. Many of them attained the *brahmarup* state and were firmly attached to Shriji Maharaj. The principal followers of Gunatitanand Swami were Bhagatji Maharaj, Jaga Swami, Balmukunddas Swami, Yogeshwardas Swami, Madhavpriyadas Swami, Madhavcharandas Swami, Krishnaji Ada, Shivlal Sheth of Botad, Vaghjibhai of Vaso, Kalyanbhai of Vanthali, Velo Sathvaro of Bagasara, Rayo Desai of Kamigadh, Karsan Bambhaniyo of Hamapar, Ram Bhanderi of Chadiya, Lalabhai of Upleta and Arjanbhai, etc.

7. Deep faith in God, dynamism, glory and valour were the hallmarks of Swami's

discourses – Swāmini Vāto. These qualities were rarely found in the discourses of other *sadgurus*. Wherever Swami spread the message of Satsang, he instilled such firm faith in the sublime form of Shriji Maharaj that his devotees remained uninfluenced by others.

8. He inspired the composition of the scholarly volume of *Harililākalpataru* in Sanskrit. He thereby helped in disseminating the knowledge of Shriji Maharaj as the supreme God, as well as enriching the literature of the Sampradaya.

9. Despite his efficient management of the administration of the mandir in Junagadh, Swami never had to ask for any funds. His main objective was to instil steadfast faith in Shriji Maharaj. Once that was achieved, devotees were unlikely to use their earnings in other pursuits, and therefore would automatically donate funds to the mandir. With their firm faith, they were ready to sacrifice their all for Shriji Maharaj, Swami and the mandirs. That is why Swami could say to Acharya Raghurvji Maharaj, "Maharaj, the *satsangis* are so staunch that if I wish, I can completely fill the Khengār step-well with their heads!"

10. While running the huge administrative set up of the mandir, looking after never-ending construction work and a wide range of other activities, Swami never slowed down the pace of religious discourses. They were enthusiastically carried out many times daily without fail.

11. The epitome of saintliness, the highest degree of pure devotion for Shriji Maharaj, strict observance of the five vows for ascetics, readiness to abide by the words of Maharaj – these were only some of the sterling qualities of Swami. Without fear or favour, he pointed out the slightest lapse in the religious codes of conduct or faith. With his steadfast intellect, he was unaffected by honours or insults.

12. The most remarkable feature, which has continued to this very day, is his illustrious line of disciples who have attained the *brahmic* state. Nowhere else can such an impressive line of enlightened disciples be found.

Gunatitanand Swami's life, work and precepts clearly show that he was the most blessed and graced disciple of Bhagwan Swaminarayan as well as his divine abode – Mul Akshar, and his best and unparalleled devotee. He is, therefore, the most suitable ideal for a devotee aspiring to become *brahmarup*.

In our Sampradaya, the *sadgurus* regularly chanted the following *dhun*:

Swami ane Nārāyan;
Swami te Gunātit Swami, Nārāyan Sahajānand Swami.
Akshar ane Purushottam;
Akshar te Gunātit Swami, Purushottam Sahajānand Swami.
Brahma ane Parabrahma;
Brahma te Gunātit Swami, Parabrahma Sahajānand Swami.

Swami and Nārāyan;

Swami is Gunatitanand Swami, Nārāyan is Sahajanand Swami.

Akshar and Purushottam;

Akshar is Gunatitanand Swami,

Purushottam is Sahajanand Swami.

Brahman and Parabrahman;

Brahman is Gunatitanand Swami, Parabrahman is Sahajanand Swami.

In this way, a devotee should have firm faith in the Akshar-Purushottam *upāsanā*. One should recognize His Divine Holiness Pramukh Swami Maharaj as Aksharbrahman and as the *pragat* form of Shriji Maharaj. One should loyally honour his commands to realize the true knowledge of *upāsanā*. All seekers of *moksha* should imbibe this knowledge, dedicate themselves to its preaching, and in turn earn the divine grace of Bhagwan Swaminarayan.

20. *Etena Sāmkhyajnānena kāranādivapustrayāt,*
Svātmā jneyaha pruthak chesho'vyākritādivapustrayāt.
Tādātmyena tatashchaikyam brahmanā svasya bhāvayet,
Brahmabhutastato bhaktyā Vāsudevam bhajetpumān.
- Satsangijivan 4.72.1-2

21. *Dashottarādikairyatra pravishtaha paramānuvat,*
Lakshyate'ntargatāshchānye kotisho hyandarāshayaha.
Tadāhuraksharam Brahma sarvakāranakāranam,
Vishnordhāma param sākshāt purushasya mahātmanaha.

22. *Murtam tu divyavigraham rupānurupa-karacharanādyava-yavishishtatvena atisundara-purushākāra-murti sat Krishnasya tato'pyatiniratishaya-sharirashobhāvataha sveshtadevasya... sevāyām asti dāsavat sadā vartate, - Setumālā* 21.22

23. *Harihi svakiyāksharadhāmanyakshara-bhāvāpanna-muktakotibhir- murtenā'kshara-brahmanā cha chhandā'nuvruttitayā kruta-paricharyaha,*
- Setumālā 159.5

24. *'Tadaksharam' Krishnasya sevakatvād mukhya-parichārakatvādi-hetoho divyairati-manoharaihi pānipādamukhādibhihi avayavaihi pratikaihi upalākshitatvāt sākruti purushākāramuchyate,- Setumālā* 159.5

25. *Ato yatra mandire ekaiva Shrikrishnamurtihi syāttatrāpi Rādhādisevakamandalasahita eva Shrikrishno bhāvaniya iti āshayaha,*
- Shikshāpatri Commentary, p.439

26. The author, Darbar Abhaysinhji of Lodhika, has described the glory and power of Gunatitanand Swami, as narrated by Shriji Maharaj in Bhadra.

27. For a detailed account of this incident refer to *Bhagwan Shri Swaminarayan* (2nd edition) Part 2, p. 337 and *Gunatitanand Swami* Part I, p. 50.

28. Rathod Dhadhal narrated this incident to Jasa Gor and Nagji Sheth. Shastriji Maharaj heard it from them in person.

29. Shukanand Swami narrated this incident to Siddhanand Swami's disciple, Krishnacharandas, who in turn told it to Shastriji Maharaj in Mahuva. [From the letters of Shastriji Maharaj, *Swaminarayan Prakāsh*, Jan. 1987]

30. This incident is described in *Purushottam Charitra,* p.100

31. This incident is taken from Shastriji Maharaj's recorded discourse.

32. The 'pair' means Shriji Maharaj and Gunatitanand Swami. Nishkulanand Swami propagated this principle since he had realized both these forms. Shastriji Maharaj and Yogiji Maharaj heard this from leading *sadgurus.*

33. The assembly hall and the portrait were both destroyed in a fire later.

34. This propaganda was started by Mana Bhakta of Gadhada – a disciple of Gopalanand Swami. Shastriji Maharaj asked him to take an oath on the Shikshāpatri that Gopalanand Swami is Akshar. Mana Bhakta then hesitated and admitted, "At that time there was no such talk [of Gopalanand Swami being Akshar]." [From a recorded speech of Shastriji Maharaj]

7. BAPS

After studying this book, one should keep in mind the following points regarding *upāsanā*:

7.1 Upāsanā: What to Understand

Written Statement on the Philosophical Principles of Baps[35], Guru Purnima, Samvat 2064; 18 July 2008

The five entities – *jiva, ishwar, māyā*, Brahman and Parabrahman – are eternal, real and forever fundamentally separate from each other.

Parabrahman

Parabrahman Purushottam Narayan[36], the Master of Akshar, is eternal, supreme, always divine, always with a form, free of faults, beyond *māyā*, one and unique, and a *chaitanya* entity.

In his divine Akshardham, he is seated on a divine *sinhāsan* (throne) in his eternally divine, lustrous and teenage human form complete with two arms and all other features. He (Parabrahman) is worshipped with *dāsbhāv*[37] by the *murtimān* (personal) form of Aksharbrahman and the *brāhmic*-bodied infinite *muktas*, who have attained similarity to Aksharbrahman.[38]

Parabrahman is forever naturally replete with infinite liberating virtues and devoid of *māyik* (mundane) qualities. He is free of all faults, forever possesses all powers, is all-knowing, and is the all-doer and destroyer. He is the material and efficient cause of all creation. While remaining present in his divine Akshardham in his *vyatirek* (particular) form, he pervades the infinite *brahmānds* in his *anvay* (all-pervasive) form as *antaryāmi* and is their support.

He is always infinitely more powerful than *jivas, ishwars, māyā, akshar muktas* and Aksharbrahman and is their independent controller, inspirer and *shariri*. By his wish, he is the giver of the fruits of the actions of all the *jivas* and *ishwars*. He is the inspirer of their ability to will, to know and to do.

Parabrahman Purushottam Narayan is imperceptible by the *māyik indriyas* (senses) and *antahkaran* (mind, etc.). While still remaining in Akshardham, by his own divine wish and out of compassion, for the ultimate liberation of infinite *jivas* and *ishwars* and to fulfil the wishes of his devotees, he manifests with all his divine virtues, powers, etc., in human form in each *brahmānd* and becomes visible to all.

That manifest form of Parabrahman Paramatma is Sahajanand Swami Maharaj – Shri Swaminarayan Bhagwan. He is the absolute focus of worship for us all. To forever continue his *upāsanā* in a manifest form even after leaving his (human) body, he always remains totally manifest in his *anvay* form through the Aksharbrahman guru.

He (Parabrahman) is the cause of all avatars; he is the *avatāri* and is the master of them all.

When, by his special wish, he pervades a *jiva* or an *ishwar* for a particular task, an avatar manifests. The *chaitanyas* of each of these avatars are fundamentally separate

from each other. Like these avatars, the *chaitanyas* of Vasudev and the Chaturvyuh, and the 24 *murtis,* like Keshav, etc., are fundamentally separate from each other.

Aksharbrahman

Aksharbrahman is separate from Parabrahman. Like Parabrahman it is one, eternal and a *chaitanya* entity and it is beyond the three *gunas*. It is forever divine, replete with infinite liberating virtues, devoid of all *māyik* qualities and free of all faults. The form, qualities, powers, etc. of Aksharbrahman are dependent only on Parabrahman. And by the eternal wish of Parabrahman, it is the cause, support, controller and *shariri* of all of *jad* (inanimate) creation and *chaitanya* forms (*jivas* and *ishwars*) and pervades them.

Although Aksharbrahman is essentially one entity, it serves in four different ways.

In its Chidakash form, Aksharbrahman pervades within and is present outside the infinite *brahmānds* and supports them.

In the form of Dham (Akshardham), Aksharbrahman is the divine abode of Parabrahman, the *murtimān* (personal) form of Aksharbrahman and the infinite *akshar muktas.* There is only one such Akshardham; it is eternal and forever beyond the three *gunas*. Only the *muktas* who have attained similarity[39] to Aksharbrahman are able to enter it.

In the personal attendant form in that Akshardham, Aksharbrahman has, like Parabrahman, a divine human form complete with two arms and all other features. He forever remains engulfed in the service of Parabrahman and is the ideal for the *akshar muktas.*

In the form of the guru as the eternal and complete representative of Parabrahman, that Akshar manifests in a human form with Paramatma in each *brahmānd* so that through his (Akshar's) divine association, he can make the *jivas* and *ishwars* who are bound in the cycles of birth and death *brahmarup*, establish in them the highest level of *nirvikalp nischay*, ultimately liberate them and forever let them experience the manifest presence of Paramatma through himself. He (the Aksharbrahman guru) protects the traditions of the Sampradaya and graces all with the experience of the highest bliss. In this succession of Aksharbrahman gurus, Gunatitanand Swami, Bhagatji Maharaj, Shastriji Maharaj and Yogiji Maharaj have appeared. This succession continues forever. At any one time, the path of ultimate liberation remains open through only one guru.

Māyā

Māyā is composed of the three *gunas*, it is eternally changing, *jad* (inanimate), a material cause of the creation of infinite *brahmānds* and the diverse mysterious power[40] of Paramatma. As the cause of ego and attachment of *jivas* and of *ishwars*, this *māyā* has been the cause of their births and deaths since eternity. Aksharbrahman and Parabrahman are forever totally aloof from and beyond *māyā* and are its *shariri.*

Ishwar

Ishwar is an eternal *chaitanya* entity different from Parabrahman, Aksharbrahman and *jivas*. In comparison to Aksharbrahman and Parbrahman, *ishwars* are extremely

powerless; but compared to *jivas* they possess more power and *jnān* (knowledge). Paramatma, through his wish, assigns them to the tasks of creation, etc. of the *brahmānds*. Like the *jivas*, these *ishwars* are countless in number, subtle like an atom, possess the qualities of indivisibility, etc., are *jnānswarup* (personified knowledge of their own self)*, jnātā* (knowers), doers of good and bad karmas and experiencers of the fruits of those karmas. They have been bound by *māyā* since eternity.

Pradhan Purush, Virat Purush, the devas of their *indriyas* and *antahkaran*, Brahma, Vishnu, Mahesh, etc. are all *chaitanya* entities of the *ishwar* category and these *ishwars* are fundamentally different from each other.

Jiva

Jiva is an eternal *chaitanya* entity different from Parabrahman, Aksharbrahman and *ishwars*. These *jivas* are countless, subtle like an atom, possess the qualities of indivisibility, etc., are *jnānswarup, jnātā,* doers of good and bad karmas, and experiencers of the fruits of those karmas. They have been bound by *māyā* since eternity.

Sadhana and Benefits

To attain ultimate liberation*, mumukshus* (spiritual aspirants) should firmly love Parabrahman Purushottam Bhagwan Swaminarayan and the manifest Aksharbrahman guru through whom Parabrahman manifests fully and continuously. They must develop *nirdosh buddhi* and a feeling of the highest divinity in them. When they (*mumukshus*) meet either of them they should be convinced that they have met Parabrahman. By firmly associating with them through thought, word and deed they should please them immensely.

Mumukshu jivas and *ishwars* who endeavour in this way, through the grace of Parabrahman, having achieved *ekāntik* dharma, become *brahmarup*, that is, attain similarity[41] to Aksharbrahman, and attain the highest bhakti to Parabrahman. All their miseries and faults are forever destroyed, and while alive, they experience the highest bliss of Paramatma.

By the wish of Paramatma, such a *brahmarup* devotee, on leaving the (physical) body, attains the Akshardham of Paramatma via *archimārg* (a divine path), and there with a *brāhmic* body, while serving by doing darshan with *dāsbhāv*,[42] forever enjoys the divine bliss of the Lord of Akshardham, Parabrahman.

The Meaning of Akshar-Purushottam Upāsanā

Akshar-Purushottam *upāsanā* is not the *upāsanā* (worship) of two entities – Akshar and Purushotam. But it means to become *aksharrup* and offer *upāsanā* to Purushottam, i.e., to become *brahmarup* and offer *upāsanā* to Parabrahman. Therefore, when Parabrahman in human form returns to his abode he suppresses the powers of the Brahmaswarup guru and himself remains manifest on earth through him. Therefore, a *mumukshu* who profoundly associates with the manifest guru is, in fact, offering *upāsanā* only to Paramatma.

The meaning of the Swaminarayan *mahāmantra* is incorporated in the meaning of Akshar-Purushottam *upāsanā*. That is, to become *swāmirup,* i.e., *aksharrup,* and offer bhakti and *upāsanā* with *dāsbhāv*[43] to Narayan, i.e., Parabrahman Purushottam Narayan.

Conclusion

Thus, these philosophical principles are Vedic, eternal, revealed by Shriji Maharaj and propagated by the Gunatit guru *paramparā*. So, all devotees of the Bochasanwasi Shri Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha should strengthen their understanding in this way and explain it to other *mumukshus*.

Jai Swaminarayan from Shastri Narayanswarupdas.

Guru Purnima, Samvat 2064, Bochasan.

7.2 Upāsanā: What Not to Understand

1. Shriji Maharaj – Purushottam Nārāyan is like the various avatars or *āchāryas* or devotees.
2. When God manifests on earth, he does not remain in his abode, i.e., his abode becomes vacant during that period.
3. Only Purushottam exists, but there is no entity such as Aksharbrahman.
4. Only Aksharbrahman exists. Purushottam is included in him and can live only through him.
5. The *ātmā* of a released *mukta* does not become like Aksharbrahman.
6. There is no difference between *jiva (ātmā)* and Parabrahman.
7. There is no difference between a *mukta* and Aksharbrahman.
8. There is no difference between a *mukta* and Purushottam.
9. There is no difference between Aksharbrahman and Parabrahman.
10. Aksharbrahman as the personal attendant is not *murtimān*(with form). Aksharbrahman is only formless, is merely the abode or is only divine light.
11. Articles such as the footwear and clothes worn by Shriji Maharaj, quilts and rooms used by him are equivalent to Mul Aksharbrahman. (In reality, articles related to Shriji Maharaj can be termed divine, but cannot be called Aksharbrahman.)
12. *Paramhansas* other than Gunatitanand Swami can also be called Mul Aksharbrahman.
13. It is possible to become *brahmarup* or *ekāntik* through the refuge of the mandir *murtis* or shastras without resorting to Parabrahman Paramātmā or a God-realized Gunātit Sadhu (*pragat* manifestation of Shriji Maharaj).
14. *Moksha* can be achieved despite not honouring the commands or duties and codes of conduct prescribed in the Shikshāpatri, or by minimizing their importance.
15. Without the contact of a God-realized Sadhu and his grace, the principles of the Vachanāmrut and other shastras or *nishchay* [44] of God can still be understood or explained by one's own efforts.

35. This is a translation of the Gujarati text written by Pramukh Swami Maharaj.
36. Parabrahman, Purushottam, Narayan, Bhagwan, Paramatma and any combination of these words are synonymous for God.
37. Service performed willingly and naturally by the devotee; not out of forced or coerced submission by Parabrahman, but out of love, respect, adoration, humility and gratitude.
38. Aksharbrahman has countless virtues and is eternally liberated. 'Similarity' to Aksharbrahman means that the *jiva* attains those virtues of Aksharbrahman by which it attains liberation and is able to offer pure, true and the highest *upāsanā* to Parabrahman.
39. See footnote 4.
40. It is an instrument, just like a sword is the 'power' of a soldier.
41. See footnote 4.
42. See footnote 3.
43. See footnote 3.
44. Similarly the shastras say that the *panch vartmān – nishkām, nirlobh, nisswād, nissneh* and *nirmān* – are the vital redemptive attributes that a sadhu must possess. The God-realized Sadhu in whom these attributes are displayed is said to have established rapport with God. Therefore, his words should be taken as the ultimate truth, and the knowledge of God that he infuses in the disciples is the ultimate knowledge and the eternal truth.

- Vachanāmrut, Gadhadā III 27

8. APPENDIX

FAQs Regarding Akshar-Purushottam Upāsanā

We have examined the basic principles of the Akshar-Purushottam *upāsanā* as revealed by Bhagwan Swaminarayan.

In a book of this size, there is no scope for an in-depth analysis. However, on the basis of the Vachanāmrut, Swāmini Vāto, the extensive literature and history of the Sampradaya, as well as the lives of great *paramhansas* and the experiences of the God-realized Satpurush, it is clear that these principles are true, logical and in accordance with the shastras.

We can also say that Shastriji Maharaj did not do anything new, neither did he establish a new Sampradaya. He simply clarified and propagated the principles of Brahman and Parabrahman as taught by Bhagwan Swaminarayan. Had he not done this, the traditional and conservative section of followers would not have allowed this important principle to be established. However, Shriji Maharaj's divine mission was not destined to remain unrevealed. Shastriji Maharaj faced daunting odds, yet due to his saintliness and purity, firm faith in Shriji Maharaj, genuine *brahmic* state, profound scriptural knowledge and penetrating logical insight, he was able to establish the true Akshar-Purushottam *upāsanā* revealed by Bhagwan Swaminarayan.

The following questions and answers further clarify these principles.

Question 1: Shriji Maharaj established the Swaminarayan Sampradaya. Those who part from this original Sampradaya are considered excommunicated. Therefore, their talks should not be heard, nor should one have any contact with them. Nails, hair and teeth are only attractive in their proper *sthān* – place. Out of place, they are useless. Religion cannot survive without roots. How can such misunderstanding be avoided?

Answer: Here, the key word is *'sthān'* – place. Shriji Maharaj has explained the meaning of *sthān,* "An individual's dharma according to the four *varnas* [Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra] and the four *ashrams* [*Brahmacharya, Grahastha, Vānaprastha* and *Sanyasta*] should be known as '*sthān*'. You are all renunciants; but if you were to leave this fold and tread the path of householders, then you would be known to have diverted from your '*sthān*'. So, even in the most difficult circumstances, or even if I were to issue a command, you should not deviate from your dharma" (Vachanāmrut, Sārangpur 9).

It is also laid down in the Shikshāpatri, "Those of my male and female disciples who do not follow the tenets of this Shikshāpatri are considered excommunicated from the Fellowship" (Shikshāpatri 207).

Aspirants should therefore think who is considered to be in their *'sthān',* i.e., the Sampradaya: sadhus who strictly observe the five-fold vows and scrupulously renounce women and wealth are, or those in saffron clothes who may physically be part of the Sampradaya, but act according to their own free will!

To a genuine seeker, Shriji Maharaj's command is to stay at *Naimishāranya Kshetra*,

"Naimishāranya Kshetra should be known to be wherever God's *Ekāntik Sant* resides. So, one should seek liberation wherever one sees such a Naimishāranya Kshetra – in the form of the association of the *Sant* – and one should remain there with an absolutely resolute mind" (Vachanāmrut, Sārangpur 7).

Hence, Shriji Maharaj's advice is that a true aspirant should cross the traditional borders of place and identify an *Ekāntik Sadhu* for his or her *moksha*.

In spite of reaching this stage, if one still goes astray, yet maintains unwavering faith in God's form, Shriji Maharaj consoles him with these words, "However, one should also intensely maintain the strength of conviction in God's form; i.e., 'I have attained the very form of God who reigns supreme, who forever possesses a divine form, and who is the '*avatāri*' – the cause of all the avatars.' If a person realizes this, then even if he may have left the Satsang fellowship, his love for God's form will not diminish. In fact, even though he is out of Satsang at present, ultimately, when he leaves his body, he will go to God's Akshardhām and stay near God. On the other hand, a person may be in the Satsang fellowship at present, and he may even be abiding by the commands prescribed in the shastras, but if his conviction of God is not firm, then when he leaves his body, he will either go to the realm of Brahmā or to the realm of some other deity; but he will not go to the abode of Purushottam Bhagwan" (Vachanāmrut, Gadhadā II 9).

Despite being physically away from the original Sampradaya, Shastriji Maharaj explained the supreme identity of Shriji Maharaj; therefore he can be regarded as close to God.

What is 'Dharmakul'? Literally, Dharmakul refers to the family and descendants of Dharmadev, the father of Shriji Maharaj. In spiritual terms, one who abides by the words of Dharma's son is part of Dharmakul. One who has all the redemptive attributes of God is part of Dharmakul. Regarding relatives, Shriji Maharaj has said, "Only such staunch satsang*i* Vaishnavs are my kith and kin; and I wish to stay in the midst of such Vaishnavs during this life and also in God's abode" (Vachanāmrut, Gadhadā III 21).

Therefore, only those who follow the path of dharma are dear to Shriji Maharaj. He is related to them only. Those who violate Shriji Maharaj's ethical codes and special duties are considered excommunicated, as described by him in the Shikshāpatri.

Question 2: In the literature of the Sampradaya, one does not find many specific references to Gunatitanand Swami. Despite this, why is he held in such high regard?

Answer: Gunatitanand Swami says, "In Brahmā's presence, Shukdevji, Sanak and others do not engage themselves in spiritual discussions; because they are not very well-known in that place, their words are not accepted as authority. Similarly, one who is accepted as authority may not even find a place in the shastras of the Fellowship" (Swāmini Vāto 4.64).

Therefore, this does not mean that only those who figure prominently in the shastras are great and those who are not mentioned are not.

Gunatitanand Swami has also said, "Nowhere is Parvatbhai's name mentioned in any books or shastras, yet he was truly very great" (Swāmini Vāto 5.144).

There is no reference to Radha's name in Shrimad Bhāgavat, neither is the abode of Golok mentioned anywhere. Only Vaikunth is mentioned. But since Radha was a genuine devotee, she became very famous. Also, all devotees recognize Golok as Shri Krishna's divine abode.

Sadguru Nishkulanand Swami has written:

Jone Shukjine Jadbharat ko' kone motā jānyā re,
Hatā Nishkulānand e samarth, pachhi sahue paramānyā re.

Who had known Shukji and Jadbharat as eminent?

As undeniably great they were, Nishkulanand says, they were subsequently so recognized.

- Nishkulānand Kāvya, Chosath Padi 46

Shukdevji and Jadbharat were indeed great, but they became well-known only later. Similarly, Gunatitanand Swami's and Shriji Maharaj's forms are an eternal truth and with time, their fame has spread to all corners of the globe due to their authentic glory.

Question 3: In the Shikshāpatri it is written, "My devotees should worship only those *murtis* of God that are given by the *āchārya* or consecrated by him. Only obeisance should be offered to other *murtis*" (Shikshāpatri 61).

Only *murtis* given by the *āchārya* should be worshipped in puja and only the *āchārya* is authorized to give initiation to sadhus. What is implied in this injunction of Shriji Maharaj?"

Answer: Defining an *āchārya*, the leading authors of the shastras say, "Only he deserves to be called an *āchārya* who has not simply studied the shastras, but lives in accordance with them."[45]

The *murtis* consecrated by such virtuous *āchāryas* spark with divinity. It is no wonder then that the *murtis* consecrated by perfect celibate God-realized Sadhus such as Shastriji Maharaj, Yogiji Maharaj and Pramukh Swami Maharaj are beneficent and divine.

Paramchaitanyanand Swami, Swayamprakāshanand Swami and Anandanand Swami respectively consecrated *murtis* in mandirs at Buranpur, Dhargam and Bharuch.

Pachhi santne kahe Sukhakand, suno Paramchaitanyānand;
Tame Burānpurmā sidhāvo, Lakshmi-Nārāyan padharāvo.
Amothi janane sukh jevu, tamothi pan tyā thashe tevu;
Suno Swayamprakāshānand,
tame pan muniganānā chho chand.
Māte jāo tame Dhargām, karo jaine pratishthānu kām;

Addressing the sadhus, Sukhakand [Shriji Maharaj] says,

"Paramchaitanyanand, you may kindly go to Buranpur and perform the consecration ceremony of Lakshmi-Nārāyan.

The followers there will feel as pleased by your presence as they would by mine.

And please listen Swayamprakāshanand, you are a senior among the sadhus.

Therefore go to Dhargam to perform the consecration ceremony.

Despite the presence of Shriji Maharaj (Magshar *sud* 6, Samvat 1886; 2 December 1829), Shriji Maharaj had the *murti* consecration ceremonies at Buranpur and Dhargam performed by senior sadhus. In many other mandirs, the *āchāryas* performed the *ārti* ceremony long after the initial consecration ceremonies were performed by others. In the meantime, did followers not worship or have darshan of the *murtis* in those mandirs?

Are the *murtis* used in one's daily puja all physically given by the *āchāryas*? Yet such *murtis* are being worshipped daily.

Even the *āchārya* is initiated – given *vartmān* – by a senior sadhu. Acharya Viharilalji Maharaj was initiated by Aksharbrahman Gunatitanand Swami. This fact has been noted by the *āchārya* in one of his kirtans:

Aksharmurti Gunatitanand Swami, tene āpyā vartmān.
Aksharmurti Gunatitanand Swami gave me vartmān.

Regarding the initiation of sadhus, Shriji Maharaj says in Satsangijivan, "Initiation should be given by a highly religious Param Ekāntik Sadhu and the divine *murtis* – the basis of bhakti – should be received from a *sadguru*, as *murtis* consecrated by a *sadguru* are worthy of meditation by the devotee. After receiving initiation and the consecrated *murtis* from the guru, the devotee should give up his habitual lethargy and religiously worship God" (Satsangijivan 2.51.9).[46]

As explained in this *shloka,* the God-realized Param Bhāgvat Sadhu is certainly worthy of giving initiation and consecrating *murtis*.

History has recorded the fact that Mādhavjibhai, son of Lalji Suthar (Nishkulanand Swami), and the two brothers of Sadguru Adbhutanand Swami were initiated as sadhus by Sadguru Gopalanand Swami.[47]

Question 4: Sadguru Gunatitanand Swami and Sadguru Gopalanand Swami were sadhus. Is it proper to adorn their *murtis* with garments and ornaments?

Answer: Do these bhaktas stay in Akshardhām as sadhus in the form of Gunatitanand Swami and Gopalanand Swami? Shriji Maharaj clarifies this point in the Vachanāmrut, "In actual fact, the bhakta of God is indeed nothing but a form of Brahman. That is why one should never perceive human traits in him" (Vachanāmrut, Gadhadā II 63).

"When God incarnates for the purpose of granting liberation to the *jivas*, he is always accompanied by his Akshardhām, his attendants – who are formed of *chaitanya* – and all of his divine powers; but they are not perceived by others" (Vachanāmrut, Gadhadā I 71).

Therefore, they are all *muktas*. To think about them and treat them as if they were sadhus and mortals on earth, is a sign of superficial thinking.

The sadhu and *brahmachāri* priests adorn the *murtis* of Radhikaji, Lakshmiji and other female *bhaktas*, and conduct the ceremonial puja and *ārti*. If such devotees were not considered divine, the sadhus and *brahmachāris* – who observe vows of celibacy –

would not be able to regularly carry out their puja. The *murti* of Hanumanji – a celibate devotee – is also adorned with garments of gold or silver threads and a crown; then why should they not be offered to the devotees of manifest God?

Shriji Maharaj emphasizes, "When that sadhu attains the abode of God, then just as the lords of countless millions of *brahmānds* – Brahmā and other *ishwars* – bring countless types of gifts and other articles for God, they also bring them for that sadhu" (Vachanāmrut, Gadhadā II 22).

If Brahmā and other deities offer gifts to such sadhus, what is wrong in our worshipping such *bhaktas*. On many occasions, Shriji Maharaj himself presented his garments and turbans to Gunatitanand Swami. Achintyanand Brahmachari has noted this in a prayer:

Muhuryasmai prādātpurumudamito yadvar gunair
Harirhārān paushpānnijatanu dhrutān angada mukhān,
Swabhuktam sadbhojyam varasana-mukhyam swavidhrutam
Gunātitānandam munivaramaham naumi satatam.

By whose superlative qualities Shri Sahajanand Swami was extremely pleased; and presented him garlands of flowers, bracelets, food graced by him and rich garments worn by him as *prasādi* – that eminent Sadhu Gunatitanand I forever praise.

In the Akshar Ordi at Gadhada and Akshar Bhuvan at Ahmedabad, mural paintings depict all the *akshar muktas* in the same way as Shriji Maharaj – adorned with divine garments and ornaments.

Therefore, Shriji Maharaj has said, "By performing with extreme affection such similar service of God and the *Sant* who possesses the highest qualities, even if he is a devotee of the lowest type and was destined to become a devotee of the highest type after two lives, or after four lives, or after ten lives, or after a hundred lives, he will become a devotee of the highest calibre in this very life. Such are the fruits of the similar service of God and God's *Bhakta*" (Vachanāmrut, Vartāl 5).

Why should one deprive oneself of such a supreme reward and why should the defects of a hundred births not be removed in this very birth?

Question 5: Apart from Shriji Maharaj, a devotee should not meditate on anyone. The Shikshāpatri also forbids one to meditate on even a *brahmavettā* – a knower of Brahman. Then why do devotees meditate on the holy Sadhu?

Answer: *Dhyān* means contemplation, remembering and reflection. In *shlok* 116 of the Shikshapatri, the instruction to develop a feeling of oneness of one's *ātmā* with Aksharbrahman is, in fact, a command to perform *dhyān* of Aksharbrahman. Since, to develop such a feeling, contemplation of Aksharbrahman is essential; and this is one form of *dhyān.*

To become *brahmarup,* Shriji Maharaj advises, "If one associates with Brahman through continuous contemplation in this manner, the *jiva* acquires the virtues of that Brahman" (Vachanāmrut, Gadhadā II 31).

While meditating, can a devotee not focus attention on the Sadhu's virtues, glory and powers?

The shastras describe many forms of *dhyān:*

1. *Sāng dhyān,* i.e., meditation on the divine body features of Paramātmā.

2. *Sapārshad dhyān,* i.e., meditation on God and his choicest devotee.

Shriji Maharaj says in the Vachanāmrut "One should meditate on Shri Krishna Bhagwan together with Radhika" (Vachanāmrut, Gadhadā I 5). In this way Shriji Maharaj shows his preference for *dhyān* of God together with his choicest devotee. This can be regarded as *sapārshad dhyān.*

Shriji Maharaj also says, "I have kept my *ātmā* absorbed in the pure and perfect Brahman. I have also forever attached myself with undying love to Purushottam Bhagwan – who possesses a definite form – and to his devotees dwelling in the radiant Akshardhām. In fact, I have no love for anything other than them" (Vachanāmrut, Gadhadā II 50).

If God has love and devotion for his *Bhakta*, then why should we not follow his example?

To acquire *nirvikalp* faith, Shriji Maharaj says, "One who worships [offers *upāsanā* to] Purushottam realizing oneself to be *aksharrup* can be said to possess the highest level of 'nirvikalp faith'" (Vachanāmrut, Loyā 12). Therefore to become one with Akshar, it is essential to meditate on him.

And Shriji Maharaj categorically states in Vachanāmrut, Vartāl 5, "Just as one performs the *mānsi* puja of God, if one also performs the *mānsi* puja of the ideal *Bhakta* along with God… by performing with extreme affection such similar service of God and the *Sant* who possesses the highest qualities, even if he is a devotee of the lowest type and was destined to become a devotee of the highest type after two lives, or after four lives, or after ten lives, or after a hundred lives, he will become a devotee of the highest calibre in this very life."

When Shriji Maharaj remains present on this earth having absorbed the form of the Brahmaswarup Satpurush, meditation on the Brahmaswarup Satpurush is actually equal to meditating on Shriji Maharaj.

Furthermore it is said that:

Dhyānamulam gurormurtihi pujāmulam guroho padam,
Shāstramulam gurorvākyam mokshamulam guroho kripā.

The root of meditation is the guru's *murti*. The root of worship is the guru's feet. The root of the shastras is the guru's word and the root of *moksha* is the guru's compassion.

The guru – the *anādi* Brahman Gunātit Sadhu – is the root of meditation. Therefore, when Aksharbrahman – the divine abode of Shriji Maharaj – is manifest on earth in human form, he also, like Shriji Maharaj and his worshipped form, is forever worthy of being meditated upon.

In Shikshāpatri verse 115 it is stated that one should not meditate upon a *brahmavettā* – one who knows Brahman. The reason for this is that *moksha* is not attained by meditating on those who have become enlightened through knowledge, from a previously unenlightened state[48] – as opposed to Aksharbrahman, who is eternally enlightened.

Sadguru Shatanand Muni specifically states in his commentary on the Shikshāpatri

that according to Shaunak Muni's assertion,[49] there is no objection to meditating on the eternally pure *Chaitanya* Brahman (described as *Naisargik* or *Amal* Brahman) along with God.

Question 6: 'Swaminarayan' is one word. Is it etymologically possible to take it to mean Swami and Nārāyan?

Answer: Soon after Shriji Maharaj met Ramanand Swami, Ramanand Swami handed over the reins of the Sampradaya to Shriji Maharaj and returned to the divine abode. At that time, Muktanand Swami, Lalji Suthar, Parvatbhai, Anandji Sanghediya and other disciples of Ramanand Swami had made up their minds that they would only accept Ramanand Swami as their guru and Nilkanth Varni (Shriji Maharaj) as their *gurubhāi* – fellow disciple: "Even if Varni were to show us Radha-Krishna right in front of our eyes, we shall still not accept anyone other than Ramanand Swami as God." Such was their irrevocable faith in Ramanand Swami.

In such circumstances, Shriji Maharaj's introduction (only 13 days after Ramanand Swami's passing away) of the chanting of the 'Swaminarayan' mantra is a point worth contemplating.

Saddened by Ramanand Swami's departure, the devotees were still quite shocked. They had unwavering faith in their guru and worshipped his wooden footwear. Though Varni had been appointed by Ramanand Swami as his successor, the devotees were still unprepared to see him occupy their guru's *gādi* (seat). What was the background, in these circumstances, for Shriji Maharaj to introduce the chanting of 'Swaminarayan'? In this regard, the following incidents merit serious consideration.

Ramanand Swami initiated Nilkanth Varni and named him 'Sahajanand' and 'Nārāyan Muni'. If Shriji Maharaj had wanted only his name to be chanted, he could have introduced the recital of 'Nārāyan Muni, Nārāyan Muni'.

When Shriji Maharaj started sending people into the state of samadhi, Muktanand Swami was extremely perturbed and returned quickly from Kutch to reprimand him, "Why are you perpetuating this hoax?"

Shriji Maharaj's reply to this question is significant. He politely said to Muktanand Swami, "I am only asking the devotees to sing the praises of our guru Ramanand Swami. If in the process they go into samadhi, what am I to do?" In actual fact, Shriji Maharaj was engaging them in the recital of the Swaminarayan mantra, in which Ramanand Swami's name does not figure. How is it then that Shriji Maharaj claimed to be singing the praises of Ramanand Swami? In this context, in the word 'Swaminarayan', Swami refers to Ramanand Swami, i.e., Sadguru *Bhakta*, who holds within him Nārāyan – referring to Shri Krishna. This is how the meaning of the word 'Swaminarayan' is to be understood here.

Ramanand Swami was the incarnation of Uddhavji, who was a devotee of Shri Krishna. Ramanand Swami also worshipped Shri Krishna. Therefore Ramanand Swami, as a *bhakta*, holds Shri Krishna within him. Shriji Maharaj therefore implied the reverence of worship of *Bhakta* with Bhagwan, disciple with preceptor – and Swami with Nārāyan. This is evident from his reply to Muktanand Swami.

With time, the devotees realized the true glory and greatness of Shriji Maharaj. Ramanand Swami gave darshan to Muktanand Swami in Kalvani. Following this, Muktanand Swami pressured Shriji Maharaj to sit on Ramanand Swami's *gādi*, and expressed his feelings by composing the *ārti*, *"Jay Sadguru Swāmi...."* From then on, many felt that Ramanand Swami and Sahajanand Swami were one, i.e., Shriji Maharaj was regarded as Sadguru, with Nārāyan (Shri Krishna) dwelling in him. With this understanding, they chanted the Swaminarayan mantra.

In Samvat Year 1868 (1812 CE), Shriji Maharaj celebrated Fuldol (the festival of colours) in Sarangpur at Rathod Dhadhal's place. Shriji Maharaj played *rās* with the sadhus and recited Kabir's poem, "*Koti Krishna jode hāth... Sadguru khele Vasant"* (With folded hands millions of Krishnas watch the Sadguru). While playing *rās*, Shriji Maharaj asked, "Who is that Sadguru?"

The sadhus replied, "Maharaj, you are that Sadguru." Placing the tip of his dance stick on Gunatitanand Swami's chest, Shriji Maharaj pointed out, "That Sadguru is Gunatitanand Swami; I am God." This incident indicates that up until this time, the sadhus accepted Shriji Maharaj as Sadguru, but did not recognize him as God – the supreme. Identifying Gunatitanand Swami as Sadguru, Shriji Maharaj explained to all of them that he, as Nārāyan, eternally dwells in Swami – Sadguru Gunatitanand Swami.

Figuratively speaking, when we show the crescent moon on the roof, the moon is not literally on the roof. But using the roof as a landmark, the moon can be located.

Similarly, Shriji Maharaj has said in Shikshāpatri verses 109 and 110: "When his manifest form is associated with Radha, the dual form is known as Radha-Krishna, and when associated with Lakshmi, as Lakshmi-Nārāyan. When associated with Arjun, he is called Nar-Nārāyan, and he is also known by various other names when he is associated with Balbhadra and other devotees." What is new in this description? This was common knowledge. Then why was it necessary for Shriji Maharaj to clarify this point? He actually wanted to convey the point that in the manner in which devotees worship Radha-Krishna, Lakshmi-Nārāyan and Nar-Nārāyan, similarly, when we worship Sahajanand Swami – Nārāyan – with his choicest disciple Gunatitanand Swami – Swami – only then do we truly recognize him as Swami-Nārāyan.

Shriji Maharaj has said in the Vachanāmrut, "If a person realizes the greatness of manifest God and his *Bhakta-Sant* in exactly the same way as he realizes the greatness of past avatars of God such as Rama, Krishna, etc., as well as the greatness of past sadhus such as Narad, the Sanakādik, Shukji, Jadbharat, Hanuman, Uddhava, etc. – then nothing remains to be understood on the path of liberation" (Vachanāmrut, Gadhadā II 21).

If Shriji Maharaj was not interested in spreading the knowledge of Brahman and Parabrahman, Akshar and Purushottam – then why did he frequently inquire about the five distinct entities during his pilgrimage covering the whole of India? Until then, Brahman and Parabrahman were already being universally worshipped as one. Manifesting on earth, what new change did Shriji Maharaj introduce? Which eternal principle did he propagate? How could he be considered supreme if he had nothing

new to offer?

Shriji Maharaj has explained in the 'Nirmān' (non-pride) chapter of *Vedras*, "The devotees who identify their *ātmā* completely with Akshar and offer *upāsanā* to Purushottam Paramātmā deserve to be highly complimented... And those who do not realize Purushottam with *Swami-sevak bhāv*, and behave as one with him should be condemned."

Some point out that grammatically 'Swaminarayan' is one word. In that case, the etymology of the words Lakshminārāyan and Narnārāyan given in Shikshāpatri proves to be wrong. If in those cases, Shriji Maharaj advocates worship of Lakshmi with Nārāyan, and Nar with Nārāyan, then the obvious inference is worship of Swami with Nārāyan.

45. *Janānurāgo yasmin syāchchhishya-dharmāvanakshamaha,*
SvaSampradaya dharmastho yashcha syātsa gururbhavet.
- Satsangijivan 4.40.51

46. *Samprāpya dikshāmiha bhaktidharmayuktād gurorbhāgwatim naraha prāk ,*
Archātataha prāpya taduktarityā bhaktim vidadhyādapatandri vishnoho.
- Satsangijivan 2.51.9

47. Life of Nishkulanand Swami in Preface of Bhaktachintāmani and Nishkulānand Kāvya; published by Vartal Diocese.

48. *Pashchādud bhuta bodhāshcha dhyāne naivopakārakāhā.*

49 *Naisargiko na vai bodhasteshāmapyan yato yataha,*
Tasmāttadamalam Brahmā nisargādeva bodhavat.

Glossary

A

acharya/āchārya founder of a religious doctrine or a school of philosophy

ahamkār 'I-ness-maker'. One of the four aspects of the *antahkaran,* characterized by its function of giving rise to the sense of self, i.e., sense of individual existence

akartum extraordinary divine power of God whereby he exercises restraint in his power to eclipse the infinite *muktas* of Akshardham by his own divine light and prevail alone {Loya-13.10}

ākāsh 'space/ether' or vacuum. One of the five gross elements, from which the *sthul* body of Virāt-Purush, i.e., the physical world, is formed. Pervades all of the other four (Gadh. I 56.12), yet remains wholly unaffected by them (Kār. 8.3, et al.)

akshar-mukta released soul, residing in Akshardham

amāyik non-material, i.e., divine

anādi eternal

anādi bheds eternal realities

ānand bliss

andaj 'born from egg'. Category of life forms born from eggs, i.e., all forms of birds, reptiles, etc.

antahkaran 'inner faculty'. The complete mind which comprises of four aspects, each characterised by its individual functions: called the *man* when generating thoughts and desires; the *buddhi* when consolidating thoughts, making decisions and resolutions, forming convictions, or discriminating; the *chitt* when repeatedly contemplating or focusing; and the *ahamkar* when forming a sense of being. Normally used in the singular since all four are aspects of the one *antahkaran*, but also often referred to as being four different *antahkarans*

antaryāmi 'inner controller'. Power of God to reside within a *jiva, ishwar,* etc., and control its each and every action. Also implies God knowing its innermost thoughts and feelings

anupravesh re-entry

anvay 'not separate'. Associated. Connected. When used for God, implies immanent, i.e., inherently existing within {Gadh. I 7; Sar. 5; Var. 7}

anyathākartum shakti extraordinary power of God

arthas one of the four endeavours or goals, namely, of acquiring worldly objects

ārti Hindu ritual of waving lighted wicks before the *murti* of God as an act of worship

āsanam seat

ashtanga yoga system of Yoga comprising eight progressive steps leading ultimately to yoga, i.e., union with God. The eight steps are: *yama* (restraint), *niyam* (observance), *asana* (seat or posture), *pranayam* (mastering the prans), *pratyahar* (withdrawal), *dharna* (concentration), dhyan and samadhi

ātmā soul

ātmajnān knowledge of one's ātmā

ātmanishthā firm belief in one's true form as ātmā

ātyantik pralay final destruction of all creation

avatāri the supreme avatar, the highest incarnation of God

avidyā false understanding of the nature of reality. Ignorance

avyākrut of the three bodies of Virāt-Purush and other *ishwars*, the causal body. Analogous to the *kāran* body of the *jivas*

B

bhāgvat God-realized

bhakta devotee of God

bhakti devotion to God

bhutas the five elements: *pruthvi, jal, tej, vāyu* and *ākāsh*. Collectively called the five *bhutas* or five *mahabhutas*

brahmabhāv the state of divine bliss after identifying oneself with Aksharbrahman; nourishing a feeling of divinity in others

brahmajnān knowledge of Brahman

Brahman Aksharbrahman, ideal Devotee of Bhagwan Swaminarayan

brahmānd individual 'cosmos' comprising of a system of 14 realms, of which there are countless millions on various planes. Each *brahmānd*, created and sustained by a Pradhān-Purush pair, contains a trinity of Brahmā, Vishnu, and Shiva as the governing deities

brahmanized relating to Brahman

brahmarup 'form of Brahman'. Possessing qualities similar to those of Brahman

brahmasattā formless light of Brahman, i.e., Chidākāsh

brahma-sushupti a dormant state

brahmic pertaining to Brahman

C

chaitanya 'Consciousness'. The substance of the *ātmā*. A higher consciousness that transcends the physical realm.

champā specific type of flower, usually yellow in colour.

chidākāsh formless and pure *chaitanya* form of Akshar. By nature, it is the all-supporting and all-pervading *ākāsh*, extremely luminous, not subject to change and eternal, within which Purush and Prakruti undergo their states of expansion and contraction. Also known as Brahman.

chintāmani divine gemstone that fulfills all the wishes of its possessor

chit consciousness

crore ten million

D

dān to give, donate

darbar court of residence belonging to a king or feudal ruler, traditionally with a central courtyard surrounded by rooms with verandas

das servant

devas gods

dhām abode

dhāmi main deity of a *dhām*

dhanvantar vaidya a very able physician of the deities

dhun chanting of God's name

dhyān meditation, entailing sustaining a concentrated state where the mind is clear and calm

divya divine

divyabhāv having a feeling that God and Satpurush are divine and free of all worldly traits and influence

dradh priti true affection

dwibhuj two-armed

E

ekāntik the elevated spiritual state in which the qualities of dharma, *jnān* and *vairāgya* and bhakti have been perfected

ekāntik bhakta highest level of devotee. One who offers *ekāntik bhakti*, i.e., perfectly possesses all four of the attributes of ekāntik dharma – dharma, *jnān*, *vairāgya* and

bhakti

F

feto long piece of cloth twisted and tied around the head as a headdress

fulvādi type of snake charmer

G

gārdi type of snake charmer

guna an inherent quality, classified as: *rajoguna, tamoguna* and *sattvaguna*

gunātit 'transcending the gunas'. That which transcends the three *gunas* and has no trace or influence of *māyā* whatsoever

i

ichchhāshakti wish

indriyas the senses; five of physical action – hands, feet, mouth, anus, and genitals, and five of perception – eyes, nose, ears, skin and tongue

ishtadev one's 'favoured deity'. Beloved god

ishwar one of the five eternal realities, a cosmic being

ishwarātmā see *ishwar*

j

jal 'water' or liquid matter. One of the five gross elements or *bhutas*

jantra magic charms

jarāyuj 'born from womb'. Category of life forms born from wombs, i.e., all forms of mammals including humans.

jiva see *ātmā*.

jivātmā *see*: *jiva, ātmā*.

jnān Knowledge

jnāni one who has knowledge

jnānshakti the power of knowledge

k

kāla 'Time'. The universal and continuous phenomenon that accounts for and gives rise to the progression of existence and events – allowing for the past, present and future – and which ultimately leads to the destruction of all things. Thus, often referred to as 'death'.

kalpataru see *kalpavruksh*

kalpavruksh magical tree possessing power to fulfil the wishes of anyone sitting under it.

kangras small decorative stone designs

karan the causal body, i.e., the *jiva's* desires or *māyā,* which causes the *jiva* to take birth again

kartum divine power of God

khijdo a kind of tree

kirtan devotional song

kriyāshakti power of action

kshar perishable

l

lādus a sweet delicacy in the form of a ball

lokas realms of creation

m

mahābhutas see *bhutas*

mahant head of a mandir

mahattattva 'major element'. First of the entities of creation produced by Pradhān-Purush

mahāvishnurup a divine form of God

manushyabhāv perceiving human attributes and failings to God and his holy Sadhu.

matsar similar to envy. But when mentioned together with jealousy, taken to mean the inability to tolerate the rise and gain of anyone else, whether it be of a person of equal standing or otherwise

māyā instrument or power of God used as the fundamental 'substance' of creation; ignorance

māyik of, or pertaining to māyā. Opposite of divine

moksha liberation. Synonym of *kalyan* and *mukti*

muktas released souls

mul root, original

mul-māyā the root form of *māyā*

murti sacred image of God that is revered and worshipped

murtimān manifest form

murti-pratishthā traditional Vedic ceremony in which *murtis*, or images, are ritually consecrated in a mandir

n

nāstik 'non-believer'. Opposite of *āstik*. Person who does not believe in the existence of God, or more generally, one who is not religiously inclined

nirākār without form

nirannamuktas liberated souls of Shvetdwip

nirbij rootless; without the ability to bear fruit

nirdosh without fault, pure

nirgun without *māyik gunas*. Possessing divine qualities and redemptive virtues

nirvikalp 'without alternatives or doubts'. A state of perfect realisation

nishchay absolute faith

P

pāgh long, thin piece of cloth tied around the head like a turban to form a traditional headdress

panch vartmān the five vows to be followed by all Swaminarayan sadhus, namely: *nirman, nishkam, nissneh, nisswad* and *nirlobh*. Also, the five basic vows accepted by devotees when initiated into the Satsang, namely, avoiding alcohol, meat, theft and adultery, and observing social purity

panchbhutas see *bhutas*

panchvishays The five types of objects in which the *jiva* indulges via the *indriyas*, i.e., various sights, sounds, smells, tastes and touches

paramhansa a special cadre of sadhus initiated by Bhagwan Swaminarayan

pārasmani Philosopher's Stone. Magical gem that turns iron into gold

paroksh non-manifest

pārshads male renunciants who wear white robes

pragat manifest

prajāpatis deities responsible for the creation of the world

prāns 'vital airs'. Collective term referring to the principle life force or energy flowing within the primary life-currents of the body, called *vāyus*, which control crucial bodily functions. There are five main *vāyus*: (1) *prān* – breath responsible for respiration (2) *apān* – breath works downwards and is responsible for the working of the excretory

organs and the organs of generation (3) *vyān* – pervades the whole body and supplies energy (4) *udān* – ascending breath (5) *samān* – breath in the central region of the body responsible for digestion or assimilation of food

prārabdha loosely taken to mean fate or destiny

pratyaksh visible before one's eyes

pruthvi 'earth' or solid matter. One of the five gross elements, from which the physical world is formed

Purush an *akshar mukta* selected by Aksharbrahman to join with Prakruti for the creation process. Also called Mahā-Purush, Mul-Purush or Akshar-Purush

R

rajogun quality of passion

S

sadguru 'true guru'. Refers to the Satpurush

sādhak a person endeavouring on the spiritual path

sadhana spiritual endeavour

sagun not divine

sākār with form

sākshi the soul (as seer), witness

sāmkhya jnān knowledge that everything is perishable

sampradaya fellowship. Body of devotees

sāmyavasthā equilibrium

sarva kartā all-doer

sarvajiva-hitāvaha for the benefit of all *jivas*

sarvopari supreme

sat permanent, i.e., imperishable and unchanging. Transcending time, and thus unbound by the past, the present and the future

satchidānand chidākāsh the blissful, all-pervading form of Aksharbrahman

satsang *sat* = truth or good, *sang* = company or group. Satsang refers to keeping the company of pious and virtuous people. Satsang is also used to describe the entire Swaminarayan Sampradaya

Satsangis member of the Satsang fellowship. One who practises satsang

sattvagun attribute of clarity and purity of thought, excellence, mental poise

satya truth

satyuga the first of the four epochs of Hindu time

sevak one who serves

sevakbhāv feeling of servitude

shakti strength

sharir-shariri body-soul relationship

shloka verse

shushka dry; meaningless

shushka-jnān knowledge that does not bear fruit

sinhāsan throne for God

sthitapragna one whose intellect is stable, undeflectable

sthul 'gross', as opposed to *sukshma*, i.e., subtle. Of the three bodies of the *jiva*, it refers to the physical body of the *jiva*, which is composed of the five elements, i.e., the five *bhutas*

sud the bright half of a month. So Kartik *sud* means 'the bright half of the month of Kartik.'

sukshma 'subtle', as opposed to *sthul*, i.e., gross. Of the three bodies of the *jiva*, it refers to the subtle body of the *jiva*, which is composed of 19 elements: the five *jnān-indriyas*, the five *karma-indriyas*, the five *prans* and the four *antahkarans*. Unlike the *sthul* body, the *sukshma* body is not visible and is commonly thought of as the mental 'body'.

sutrātmā of the three bodies of Virāt-Purush and other *ishwars*, the subtle body. Analogous to the *sukshma* body of the *jiva*.

swabhāv a person's vicious natures such as lust, anger, greed, jealousy, egotism, etc.

swadharma one's own dharma

Swami-sevakbhāv attitude of servitude to one's master

swedaj born of sweat

T

tamoguna quality of ignorance

tantra rituals for the worship of deities to attain superhuman powers

tapa austerities

tattvas elements

tej 'fire' or energy. One of the five gross elements from which the physical world is formed

tilak U-shaped mark made with sandalwood paste on the forehead, chest and arms

tirth sacred place

tyāg renunciation

U

udbhij category of life forms born out of the ground, i.e., all forms of plant-life

Upanishads final portion of the Vedas. Collection of profound texts expounded by the ancient rishis primarily revolving around the philosophical discussion of the nature of the *ātmā*, the world, *māyā*, and reality. Traditionally numbering 108 of which ten are considered to be the 'principal Upanishads'

upāsak one who believes in a certain doctrine

upāsanā philosophical framework outlining the fundamental principles of a doctrine. Philosophical understanding of the nature of God as well as the mode of worship of God

upsham state of being when, while contemplating on God or one's *ātmā*, one becomes absolutely unmindful of the world, and as a result, becomes tranquil and peaceful

V

vadi type of snake charmer

vadvānal form of fire that resides within the oceans yet remains inextinguishable

vairāgya 'detachment'. An aversion or strong, persistent dislike, generally for the world and its *māyik* pleasures

vāyu 'air' or gaseous matter. One of the five gross elements from which the physical world is formed

Vedras a text comprising Bhagwan Swaminarayan's letters to his *paramhansas*

virāt of the three bodies of Virāt-Purush and other ishwars, the physical body

vishays a material object indulged in by the *jiva* via the ten *indriyas* (senses)

vrat vow, observance

vrutti an emanaiton of the *indriyas, antahkaran* or *jiva.* In simple terms, the *jiva's vrutti* can be thought of as the *jiva's* focus of attention

vyāpak widespread

vyatirek 'separate'. Distinct or unassociated. Unconnected. When used for God, implies transcendent

Y

yagna ceremonial ritual performed as a form of worship to seek the good favour and receive the blessings of the deities

yogic power attained through yoga

yojan 1 *yojan* is about 4 miles